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TLEBANOWKA

HILL OF DEATH

A DOCUMENTARY

SHLOMO RONEN

FREUND Publishing House Ltd.

PII Redacted

Tlebanowka
Hill of Death

A Documentary

Shlomo Ronen

Freund Publishing House, Ltd.
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Shlomo Ronen

Tlebonowka Hill of Death
A documentary

English version translated from Hebrew by Dr. I.G. Zevi
English version edited by Dr. Virginia Buchner

My special gratitude to the Halpern brothers, Sam and Arie, who support the yearly memorial service for the sons of our city and the surrounding towns.

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Introduction

It is my pleasure to publish this book by Mr. Shlomo Ronen, which in its original form was written in Hebrew. As a child, Shlomo Ronen succeeded, against all odds, to survive a Hell that words cannot describe. Believing that such a catastrophe could occur in central Europe is impossible. That the legal Nazi government in Germany actually gave the order to brutally murder men, women, and children just because they happened to be Jews is even more difficult to believe.

Because I too suffered the same Hell in the same way and at the same place, I can bear witness that this book is a true documentary that describes in a chronological manner the events in the Trembowla ghetto and life both inside and outside of it.

The death that awaited the Jews at the hands of German soldiers in every place had neither compassion nor conventional limitations. Today, as I look back in retrospect, I cannot believe that so many soldeiers, who themselves had parents and children, were ready to participate in the extermination of an entire nation.

Chapter 14 of the book was excerpted from an account by Sam Halpern that describes the life before death in Kamionka, a slave labor concentration camp, which he survived. It is difficult for me to believe how cultured countries in Europe, who knew about the existence of such camps, did not intervene and allowed innocent civilians to be burned and strangled to death in the most savage form of murder that had ever been invented by a sovereign nation, and with the help of millions of their citizens. Even more astonishing is that it was done by what was considered one of the most cultured countries in Europe!

These murders were not executed by a lone soldier or by a criminal group or by religious fanatics but rather by tens of thousands of Gestapo members who were educated to do so, thereby leaving a black mark on the enitre German nation. This was not the first time that such a carnage had been waged against the Jews. One only has to consider the Crusaders and the Inquisition. And then history repeated itself, but a holocaust such as this had never occurred before. And even I still cannot believe why such a thing happened.

Because Mr. Ronen describes the events in such a true and exact manner, I do not see any reason to duplicate his narrative. But one thing remains in my memory, and I cannot free myself from it. When my mother, my sister, and I escaped from the ghetto to hide with Polish farmers, I asked my mother—and I was only ten years old, "Why are we being chased by German soldiers?"

She answered, "Because we, the Jews, do not have our own state, and for this reason no one can defend our rights."

And I made a pledge that if I lived, I would go to *Eretz Israel,* where we could live as free men and defend our country and our families. And today I am happy that I honored my pledge and came to live in Israel, where I established a family, served as a chemistry teacher, and now I am a publisher. I believe that I have contributed my share toward establishing a healthy and whole Jewish society.

I still remember that sentence that she spoke to me when she was so young and wanted so much to live, to continue loving us, and to be partner to all that transpired. To my great sorrow, one night when she went out to look for me, she was captured by Polish farmers, those who had previously hidden us. They killed her with a scythe, a death that even in the worst nightmare, one could never imagine that such a thing could occur in our century. I must state that she was a wonderful and extremely honest woman, who loved her husband and children very much. I do not understand why she had to die, she who never did anything wrong and never harmed a soul.

For 2000 years we, the Jews, were discriminated against and beaten, particularly in Europe, for no reason. Perhaps it was because of our talent for accomodating ourselves to various situations and for success in business and science. Our nation has produced many scientists, researchers, doctors, and economists that helped to advance the countries where they lived. And therefore why we had to be considered 'second-class' citizens is not clear to me, nor why we continue to die just because we are

Jews. I am glad that the whole world now agrees that we are entitled to a country of our own, but to my regret, the murder of innocent men, women, and children still continues today.

Dear Reader, you will agree with me that no reason exists for the murder of civilian populations. I believe with confidence that peace will come to our area and that we will live as a free nation, where we can defend not only our own rights but also those of all Jews worldwide. And I sincerely hope that the holocaust of our nation such as carried out by Nazi Germany will not return again in any place in the world.

H.E. Freund
Freund Publishing House, Ltd.

In memory of my mother, Frima Freund, from the house of Gottlieb, and my father, Berko Freund, and all the Jews who were murdered in the city of Trembowla.

—H. Freund

1

My carefree and secure years of childhood came to a sudden end in 1941 when the Germans entered my native town, Trembowla, during their *blitzkrieg* in pursuit of the Red Army.

And I was only eleven years old! Before I could enjoy my childhood, I was forcibly drawn into a perpetual struggle against death, a struggle that took place every minute and every second of each day, with death from starvation, from a Nazi German bullet, or from a stab with the knife of a Gentile, either Ukrainian or Pole but usually Ukrainian, those who had lived with us in peace for years, with good neighborly relations and as it had seemed occasionally, in friendship.

But this had been a mere impression, perceived with the eyes of a child!!! Our neighbors, the Ukrainians, who had turned to the Jews for aid, usually financial, and had received it were those who now welcomed the German invader with open arms. They suddenly forgot all the years of neighborly relations and became bitter enemies of the Jewish population.

I was only eleven, and the truth is that while observing the Germans and their behavior during the early period of occupation, I did not understand all the anxiety and fear among the Jews that the arrival of the Germans had provoked. During the first phase of the German occupation, we had not yet seen murder units like the SS, the Gestapo, the *Einsatzgruppen*, and others, whose only or principal objective was exterminating the Jews. Nonetheless, these units were still to come!

I was only eleven at the time! A child of tender age, whose thoughts were centered on watching his playing stones, five stones, and making his parents happy with his music lessons, which were a special concern of his mother. His father was particularly pleased to hear his son reciting on Friday what he had learned in the *Cheder* (Jewish religious elementary school) during the hours that he was free from the public school, where Jewish children studied too. In addition to the usual subjects, I also studied music in this school, especially playing the mouth organ and mandolin. The music class had only two Jewish students.

I was born in eastern Poland, in a region known as Galicia, which, until the end of World War I, had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire under Emperor Franz Josef II.

As a young girl, my mother had studied in a secondary school in Lvov, the capital of Galicia. She had learned to speak, read, and write German there, in addition to other subjects, so she was considered an educated woman. On the other hand, my father's parents were satisfied with providing him with a Torah education befitting a Jewish man. Thus, unlike my mother with her broad education, my father had mastered the Old Testament and the Talmud.

Once a week we had a dairy meal, which made me happy because I did not like heavy meat dishes. For this dairy meal, my mother used to prepare *varenikes*, a choice kind of food made from dough, mashed potatoes and cheese, which I loved very much. I remember myself sitting on the wooden floor of the big living room (we also had two bedrooms, one for parents and one for children) watching my mother prepare the *varenikes*. At the same time, I played with the five stones I had taken out of my pocket.

"Now I realize why you have such big holes in your pockets," mother reproached me, "it's the stones!"

I stopped playing and looked at her.

"This is not a game for a Jewish child!" She went on, "You should be playing with buttons rather than spoiling your pockets!"

I opened my mouth to express my disapproval, but my mother continued: "And now enough with the games. Take out your mouth organ and play something for me!"

This command I accepted willingly. I liked playing the mouth organ and certainly for my mother, who loved music. While I was playing, my mother finished preparing the varenikes and placed them on the cooking stove at the far end of the room. At the opposite end stood another stove, which mainly served for heating but could also be used for cooking. Both stoves could be heated with either wood or coal. A third stove was installed between the two bedrooms to heat both rooms. Whereas the living room stoves were made of iron and red bricks, the third one was surrounded by glossy tiles. I still remember those very cold winter days, when my father returned from one of his frequent journeys and hurried to stand with his back to the stove and his hands behind him. Having warmed up, he would go on with his daily business, which usually included his evening prayer, as he did not usually pass a synagogue on his way and could not take part in a public prayer.

Mother accompanied my music by singing. She had a sweet voice; I knew the songs she loved and I played those tunes.

"What is it Shlomo?" father called when entering the house. "What's the great joy in the middle of the day? One would think that you have heard the ram's horn of the Messiah and you are accompanying him with your mouth organ!"

"Leave the child alone, Joseph," my mother said in jest. "He saw me cooking *varenikes* and he plays just because he is happy."

"*Varenikes*!" father said, looking at the stove and smelling the food. "Excellent! Now let's go out and load the carriage with the egg boxes. We must hurry to the wholesale warehouse to deliver the boxes that must go to Lvov."

Oh! I haven't mentioned something yet. My father was an egg merchant. He received the eggs from the farmers—Gentiles in the surrounding villages—and delivered them to the main warehouse.

I am playing my mouth organ

"And you will let me drive the horses?" I asked full of hope. "No," mother intervened. "You are still a little boy and you will have to wait until after your bar mitzvah before you can drive the horses."

Bar mitzvah! Oh, how I envied those who had already reached the age of thirteen and had experienced the bar-mitzvah ceremony. As long as you are under thirteen you are still a child, and then, all at once, you become an adult and you are considered a man!

The very idea of driving the horses spurred me to hurry out, and I started to load the egg boxes.

Soon I was leading the horses out of the courtyard toward the main road to the warehouse. I was extremely proud! I was driving the horses with my father beside me, watching and guiding me and ready to take the reins, if necessary.

I looked back at my mother, who had come out of the house. She waved her hands and called: "Don't be late, Joseph! Come back soon. The *varenikes* are tastier when they're warm!"

My little sister, Zipporah—or Feigele, as we used to call her—also waved her small hands and called something that I couldn't hear.

Just then my big brother, Moshe, came home carrying a violin. He was back from his music lesson. My parents showed him special respect. He was expected to become a great engineer and violinist.

And what has this to do with our little town? Well, our uncle, Mordechai, lived in Detroit in America. He had emigrated years ago. In one of our letters he had been told that Moshe was playing the violin and liked playing very much, and in response, Uncle Mordechai wrote that he intends to arrange a stay in America for Moshe to study music. He also promised to take care of Moshe's education and to have him study engineering!

Now my brother joined my mother and my little sister. Oh, how I envied him!

"I would also like to study music and become an engineer," I said to my father.

He laughed, patted me on my knees and said: "You have time to think of your future, Shlomo'le, first we will celebrate your bar mitzvah and then . . ." He was silent for a while before continuing: "In the meantime, we must think about me. Soon Moshe will leave us and go to America, and only you will be here to go with me to the prayers of the Festivals and the High Holy Days!"

Then father began to chant the High Holy Day prayer "And all believe that He . . ." and I joined him with my 'thin and pleasant voice' as my mother and other adults had stated repeatedly.

I should add that father served as a cantor in the Hassidic *shtibel* (small synagogue) of our town. Busy with his work, however, my father could not attend the public service every day. He got up at four in the morning, fed the horses and the few chickens we kept, and only then he wrapped himself in the *tallith* (prayer shawl), wore the *tefillin* (phylacteries) and recited the morning prayers.

But on Saturdays and Holidays, my father went to the *shtibel* and prayed together with all the Jews who were followers of the same *rebbe* (rabbi), mainly as a cantor. He did not accept any payment for this service—he contented himself with the reward that he would receive in the world beyond.

• • •

Of course, at the time I did not know, but in retrospect, the memory of this picture, of leaving the courtyard on the way to the warehouse a few miles away, gives me a heavy feeling of distress and grief and pain.

The war had already begun but hadn't affected us because we were living in the zone that had been passed to the Russians under the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement. In the meantime, the Nazi *blitzkrieg* against the Soviet Union had started, and now we too fell into the hands of the German oppressor.

Moshe was sent to forced labor right in the first phases of the war. He was transferred to a camp where rocks were smashed to

produce gravel for the German roads. As usual, the Germans provided their detainees with only the amount of food that was necessary to keep them alive and capable of working. But the lack of hygienic measures soon caused a typhus epidemic, and Moshe was among the first to fall ill and he . . .

He was murdered by the Germans!

Moshe was the first one in our immediate family to be killed by the Nazis. Then, not much later, my mother and little sister were caught in the first German *action* and sent to the death camp of Belzec. Later it became known that some six hundred thousand Jews from Eastern Poland had been killed there!

• • •

So far, the war had not reached us, and we were not even aware of the destiny of the Jews in the German-occupied territories. The Germans knew very well how to conceal their actions and how to prevent the spread of information. They did not want to frighten the Jews and give them a reason for rebellion.

This situation, however, could not last long. Soon the war against the Soviet Union broke out, and we were in the midst of it.

I was only eleven when the Germans suddenly attacked the Russians, and the panic-stricken Red Army fled. Only eleven.

Persecuting the Jews was not the first thing the Germans did. In the beginning they were busy chasing the fleeing Red Army. But our neighbors, the gentile Ukrainians, started to annoy us. The Germans turned a blind eye to the violence of the Ukrainians.

Being blonde, my mother's outer appearance was not like that of a typical Jewess. She even admired the young blond German soldiers, who smiled all the time and behaved so politely. Maybe this demeanor was because we did not live in the town itself; our house was at a distance of about two and one-half miles from the town. The house was big, surrounded by a vegetable garden and fruit trees and a pretty wooden fence painted white. Inside Trembowla, our town, anti-Jewish riots

were already beginning, and the German occupation force was already issuing laws against the Jews.

"They can't be as bad as we have been told," mother said. "Look how handsome and pleasant they are!"

"Nevertheless," my father said, "be careful and stay at home when a group of Germans passes the house, and don't smile at them!"

"Yes, Mr. Joseph Ronis," my mother replied and went to the other room.

But, as I already mentioned, the war had not yet reached us, and my father and I were on our way to the main wholesale warehouse with a batch of eggs.

My father served as a cantor in the *shtibel* of the followers of the Hassidic Rabbi of Kopiecince. I have a vague memory of visiting the Rabbi of Kopiecince at the age of five with my father. The Rabbi gave me a 5-*grosz* coin—this was called a Rabbi's *shmire* (saving). What I remember was a large courtyard surrounded by three-story buildings and lots of young *yeshiva* students. I assume that nothing has remained of that magnificent compound. And when my father took the reins from my hands—the road was full of pits and the carriage had to be driven with much care and skill not to break the eggs—he suddenly started to chant one of the High Holy Day prayers, making a sign for me to join him, just as my brother Moshe and I used to do during the synagogue service.

"And all believe that He knows the thoughts of man . . . ," my father chanted, while I accompanied him with "bim, bim, bam."

Suddenly father stopped singing. A carriage with young Gentiles came galloping against us and, judging from their behavior, my father understood that they might be dangerous, so he swiftly turned our carriage aside. The youngsters passed us, using indecent language, and somebody even threw an empty bottle into our carriage. The bottle did not hit us. It just shattered and the pieces spread around.

"I wish that the Messiah would already come," my father sighed and raised his eyes to the sky.

"The *melamed* (teacher) told us," I said, "that when the Messiah comes, the dead will be resurrected. All the dead will rise from their graves, and He will bring them to Jerusalem, to the Temple that is going to be rebuilt. Only the Jews will rise from their graves, not the Gentiles, so there will be plenty of room on the earth; correct, father?"

My father did not reply. He only gave me a sad look and then, suddenly, his face shone and his eyes lit up and he began to chant the prayer, "Oh, may the Temple be rebuilt speedily," and I joined him with: "ay, ay, ay, bili, bili, bom."

Despite the behavior of the young Gentiles on the road and everywhere else in the town and in the nearby villages, the life of the Jews in our surroundings remained good and quiet until the war reached us, and I was still a little, 11-year-old boy, spoiled and loved, and the only things that bothered me were games and playing the mouth organ and the mandolin.

2

June 22, 1941.

Nazi Germany breaks its agreement with the Soviet Union and suddenly attacks the Red Army. The war, until now so far away, finally reaches us. After a night of roaring cannon fire and street shooting and earth tremor caused by air raids, we saw the first German soldiers in the morning.

The Ukrainians, however, could not sit still. They hated the Jews intensely and hoped that the Germans would come and take revenge on the Jews—with the help of the Ukrainians, of course. Soon, a few days after the Germans arrived, the Ukrainians managed to call their attention to a wealthy Jewish family of eleven members. The Nazis confined the Jews in the cellar of their house and threw two grenades into the room through the window. The entire Katschor family was liquidated! No one survived!!!

The house of the Katschor family was outside town, not far from our house. I remember my father returning home that night, pale and panic-stricken. He addressed my mother, who had, until now, sympathized to some extent with the blond and civilized Germans:

"Well, Yente, what do you think now of your blond and cultured young men? Killing like everybody, only with culture!"

My mother went, together with my father, to see what had happened in the house of the Katschor family, and she came back bewildered and as pale as a ghost, unable to breathe a word.

"Maybe it was an accident, something unintentional!" she finally replied angrily and with a shivering voice as though defending herself against my father.

"An accident? Something unintentional?," responded my father angrily. "It is time that you realize the bitter truth, Yente! They are murderers! They will just get organized and then begin with their real objective, exterminating the Jews!"

It turned out that my father knew what he was talking about! He went on telling this to other Jews in the town, but they were unwilling to believe him! It was hard for them to believe that the Germans were actually preparing genocide.

Unfortunately, my father was right! Oh, how I wish he hadn't been!

The Germans had indeed been killing Jews here and there, assisted by the Ukrainians, but so far all this was just child's play. Something like an introduction to the real thing. The Germans acted according to a meticulous plan and were in no hurry. First the Germans set up the *Judenrat*, the council of the Jews, or a community board through which the Germans were going to act. As a first task, the Germans required the *Judenrat* to provide them with gold and silver articles as a contribution of the Jewish community to the German war effort. The Jews were commanded to donate these valuables, and they gave!

The smell of gold and silver intoxicated the Ukrainians, but in the town itself, in the neighborhood exclusively populated by Jews, the Ukrainians were afraid to act for fear of annoying the Germans.

The situation of Jews like us who lived in the suburbs was different. At night, Ukrainian youngsters used to enter Jewish houses, looting and severely beating the Jews. And these were not strange people! The looters and pogrom-makers were the sons of our long-time neighbors!!!

I remember how they broke into our house. It was in the middle of the night. They did not knock at the door asking to be let in! They smashed the window panes and the door and broke in—eight or ten hooligans armed with clubs, knives and axes.

My father encountered them with words of persuasion and entreaty, asking them to save the family members.

"Take whatever you like, good neighbors," he called in a trembling voice, his body trembling as well, "but don't hurt us! You know that we have never hurt any one of you."

"Away with you, dirty Jew!" They pushed him aside and went on beating him with their fists and kicking him with their boots. Thank God, they did not use the clubs, the knives, and the axes!

Crying out of despair, my mother hurried to help my father, but the hooligans hit her too and then turned to looting our belongings. Only we, the children, were spared. They pushed us to the corner of the big room and threatened to break our bones if we dared to not sit still in the corner.

What remained of our property was robbed the next night, and three nights later we had turned into refugees in need of public aid!

Like all the rich and well-to-do Jews, we soon became beggars. Our neighbors, the adult Gentiles, came to our parents, shook their heads at our bitter fate, and consoled us by saying that this situation could not last long and that a day will come when law and order are restored in Galicia. They 'bought' the house and the land from us very cheap, as well as what still remained—what the hooligans hadn't yet plundered—of the fowl and cattle.

Like all Jews in the suburbs of Trembowla, we went with our poor belongings to the *Judenrat* and asked for help. Not easily, after quarrels and threats and intervention of the *Jewish police*—an organization the Germans had set up and placed under the control of the *Judenrat*—the Judenrat managed to push us into one of the rooms in an apartment on the main street of the Jewish quarter, which later would become, officially, the Jewish ghetto.

3

One of the first tasks assigned to the *Judenrat* was to locate suitable people to satisfy the demands of the Germans. To accomplish this, the *Judenrat* classified all Jewish men between the ages of 16 and 60 according to their professions. The rest, who in general were called 'merchants,' including those who were also engaged in community work—synagogue beadles, cantors, Torah readers, and the like, as well as rabbis, teachers in *Cheders* (religious elementary schools) and Talmud Torah (religious secondary schools)—all these were sent to work for the Germans as 'unskilled workers'.

Our father, who was an egg dealer and of course considered a merchant, belonged to this category and was occasionally called to do unskilled work like street sweeping and pumping water from the river and bringing it in buckets to the lodgings of the Germans and to the houses of the Ukrainian elite, the Ukrainian mayor, and members of the council, doctors, priests, and so on. For such work my father usually received slices of moldy bread and potato peelings, as well as vegetables and fruit that had begun to rot.

Oh, how far had we deteriorated! Until the age of eleven I had lived in a warm and pleasant house! I had had no idea of what hunger meant—and now this!

The job of the *Judenrat* members was not their choice! The Germans selected these individuals from among respected members of the Jewish community—always as *recommended*

by the Gentiles of the town—and the *Judenrat* members did the dirty work for the Germans! In exchange for their work, the members of the *Judenrat* received some food for themselves and their families from the Germans.

And the Jewish police also did dirty work for the Germans. After all, what wouldn't a person do to save his life? In the beginning, the Germans did not touch the families of the policemen, but gradually, with the small number of people that the *Judenrat* managed to provide for the *transports*, the policemen were ordered to bring to the *concentration stations* their own family members as well. Those who hesitated or refused to comply with the instructions were immediately shot down without any scruples. Only a few yielded mentally and could not go on with their task—delivering family members, wife, mother, father, son or daughter, to the transport—especially as they learned with time, from rumors and other signs, that these people were sent to a place from where nobody returns. This knowledge was too hard for the policemen and they committed suicide. . . .

But, unfortunately, however painful it is to admit this, the truth is that most policemen remained in their positions. Moreover, those who remained became even more hard-hearted than before, and their cruelty, both outward and inward, increased.

They believed that in this way they would save their lives, but it turned out that this belief was a grave mistake. When no more Jews were left in the town, the Germans—aided by the rejoicing Ukrainians and the Jewish police—forced the members of the *Judenrat* to board the last transport train. The Jewish policemen, who were reflecting what might happen to them now, were also sent to extermination on the same train—with their equipment which included a yellow armband with a black Star of David, a club, and a whistle.

The German policy was that no Jew, whoever he was, had the right to stay alive. The whole world must become *Judenfrei* (free from Jews), but first the towns and villages must be made *Judenfrei*.

Meanwhile the Jews were packed together in the Jewish quarter, the so-called ghetto—more than 5000 Jews. With time, Jews from other small villages were attached to the Jews of Trembowla—about 3000 Jews.

No food was available. The stores were closed and the warehouses had been looted. How could the poor Jew survive without food? Who said that a Jew should at all exist? As a matter of fact, the Nazis concentrated the Jews in ghettoes to have them die there. . . .

Meanwhile, life went on and the people had to get hold of food. My father, who had always maintained the family, was now a human wreck. He could no longer fulfill his obligations as head of the family. The truth was that most of the time he had to hide to avoid being caught and sent to forced labor. Seizing people in the streets for this purpose had become a matter of routine. My father was not afraid of the work itself; he was prepared to do any work that would help feed his family, but what he was given after a day of contemptible work did not suffice even to sustain himself, much less mother; his two sons, and his little daughter.

Thus the task of obtaining food became mine.

"You are blond and have light-colored eyes," my father said to me one day, "so it will be easy for you to stroll outside the ghetto and try to find some food."

Indeed, my little sister, Zipporah, or Feigele as we used to call her, and I had light-colored hair and eyes, just like our mother, who looked like a Ukrainian or Polish woman and showed no outer resemblance to a Jewess, unlike most women in our region.

Had she removed the armband with the Star of David and strolled outside the ghetto, that the woman was Jewish would not have occurred to anyone. . . .

At the time, the band with the Star of David already had to be worn in our place. This symbol indicated from a distance that a person was a Jew, belonged to a people devoid of human rights, whose life was of no value. Anyone had the right to regard such a person as an insect, to step on him like on an ant,

no! Even worse! Worse than an ant! You don't intentionally step on ants. But you may trample a Jew intentionally after having disgraced him and humiliated him in the most offending and degrading manner. . . .

The armband, which served as a mark of disgrace despite the embroidered Star of David, was made of white cloth and had a required width of ten centimeters. Woe to the person who was caught with a narrower armband, even if it were only a few millimeters short of the ten centimeters. I remember how one day, when making my way in the street toward the *Aryan*, non-Jewish, zone to 'hunt' for some food, I saw a German police officer with a *Schmeisser*—German submachine gun—ordering four Jewish policemen, each wearing a yellow armband with a black Star of David on his right sleeve and an additional band with the German wording *Jüdische Polizei* (Jewish police) on his left sleeve, to start checking the width of the bands on the arms of Jewish passers-by. A German never walked close to a Jewish policeman; he always kept a distance from them, as if they were lepers, and his weapon was always ready and pointed at them. Because my outer appearance resembled that of a *sheigetz* (a Gentile boy), and as a little boy I was not obligated to wear the armband, I stood close to the German soldier and looked like a curious Gentile child who was watching the scene.

Our ghetto was not surrounded by a wall, and woe to the Jew who was caught outside of it, whereas a Gentile in the ghetto was only driven out by the police or the soldiers. . . .

About half a dozen armbands were measured and found to have the legal dimension, until a young Jew was caught with a band measuring eight millimeters less than prescribed.

"What's the matter?" shouted the German, observing that the Jewish policemen showed signs of hesitation.

"He is eight millimeters short, sir!" answered the man who apparently was the group leader of the Jewish soldiers.

"Only!!!" the German called full of anger, his face reddening as if flooded with blood. "Only 8 millimeters short! The order requires an armband 10 centimeters wide and if its narrower, it

means that the Jew is mocking the German authority and disregards its orders. Teach him a lesson!" He moved his Schmeisser abruptly.

The German and the Jews of course spoke German, which is understood by anyone who knows Yiddish.

The Schmeisser movement made it clear to the Jewish soldiers that they had no choice. Either they follow the instructions of the German or bear the responsibility. . . .

The four policemen immediately assailed the 'criminal' who wore an armband eight millimeters too narrow, and began to hit him with their clubs. He went down on his knees, waving his arms and trying to protect his face and his head. At the same time, he shouted loudly: "Yankel, Yankel! It's me, your brother-in-law, your sister's husband! You are the uncle of my two children!"

In vain! The policemen did not stop beating the man, and the surrounding Gentile spectators, mainly Ukrainians, sounded shouts of joy and called "Look! Look! Jews are beating Jews!"

They may have shouted something else too, but I didn't hear! I remembered that my mother, Feigele, my father, and my brother Moshe were waiting for me at home. They were waiting for me to bring them something to eat. . . . So I turned around and ran toward the railway station.

For fear of being caught and sent to forced labor, my father and brother were careful not to leave the house in daylight. Thus only I remained to feed the hungry family.

And that I would manage to bring something home was not at all certain!

Every day some twenty coaches, loaded with sacks of potatoes and cabbage, used to leave the railway station for the village. The produce was intended for the German army in the village and its surroundings, and the rest was to be sold to the Ukrainians and the Poles.

No Jew was allowed to enjoy these vegetables! Only those who worked in the kitchens of the army or the (non-Jewish) police could hope to get occasionally an amount of peel from the potatoes that were peeled in the kitchen. . . .

I had a very sharp penknife, well hidden deep in the fold of my trouser. Surely, the penknife was too small to be considered a weapon, the possession of which was punishable, but it was still a dangerous object. Arguing with a German or a Ukrainian or any other Gentile who decided to beat you up because of that penknife, even if he only intended to rob you of the knife, would not be pleasant at all.

Consequently, as I mentioned before, the penknife was well hidden in my trousers.

Several brave children—because you had to be brave to sneak out of the ghetto—and I among them, lay hidden in the thick grass on the roadside, and when the coaches passed, each one of us jumped on one of them. Using my penknife, I made a small cut in the potato sack, removed a few potatoes, and immediately jumped off the coach and disappeared.

I had to act fast because if the coachman had caught me, he would have beaten me up if he thought I was a Gentile child, but if he suspected that I was Jewish, he undoubtedly would have delivered me to the Germans and without a doubt, they would have killed me. In this way, from time to time, I used to bring home a few kilos of potatoes, and my mother would make delicacies out of them for the whole family. How? I wouldn't know, because she didn't have the necessary ingredients, so she just used water, which had to suffice as there was no alternative!

One of the first decrees issued by the Germans ordered the Jews to bring all their furs to the *Judenrat*. The furs were sent to Germany and sewn into the coats of the soldiers on the Russian front to keep them from freezing.

And woe to the Jew—or Jewess, in this case—who did not 'donate' his or her fur coat to keep the German soldier warm on the Russian front. In such a situation, the Germans not only would have seized the fur coat but also would have attached the skin of the Jew, as well. . . .

The men captured in the village were sent to forced labor in nearby camps, which were named Borkiwilky, Halobiczik, Kamjuneke, and Zgarbela.

The main work in the camps consisted of smashing rocks to produce gravel for German army roads. About 7000–8000 men worked hard in the camps, twelve hours a day. After a day's work, which was carried out in the mountains outside the camps, the 'slaves' were returned by cars to the camp, where the security measures taken by the Germans prevented any attempt to escape. Escape was possible only from the work sites, but the German reaction to the first—and probably the last—escape was such that the prisoners did not take the risk any more.

Because the Germans adopted the rule of collective punishment to discourage any further escape attempts.

In the first attempt, ten men escaped. The Germans noticed this when the first group returned to the camp. Before allowing the men to enter their barracks, they were left to stand outside, the Nazi commandant walked past them and counted repeatedly from one to ten, and every tenth man was taken aside. Eventually, a few tens of men were led to the nearby forest while being whipped and beaten with rifle butts.

The condemned men were forced to dig their own graves, and then they were shot by the Nazi murderers and thrown into the grave. . . . Not a single man remained alive! Those who were only wounded were thrown into the pit and buried alive.

This reprisal taught the prisoners that escaping did not pay. If one manages to escape, the others will pay for it with their lives!!!

With all his attempts to hide and not to show his face outdoors in daytime, my brother Moshe did not resist the temptation and one day he decided to join me on my way to get food for the family.

While walking freely and feeling my way before my brother, who walked along the fences of the houses, ready to jump and to hide into the yard on a sign from me, we had reached the backyard of the soup kitchen that the *Judenrat* had set up, hoping to grab some potato peel, when four Jewish policemen surprised us and caught Moshe.

No, the Jewish policemen should not be blamed! That same morning a German commandant had visited the *Judenrat* and, while striking his boots with his whip, he had said: "I need one hundred men for work today. Bring them to me within one hour, or else. . . ."

Nobody waited to hear what this 'or else' meant. It was no secret any more. The head of the *Judenrat* said only: "Yes, sir," nodding to the commander of the Jewish police, and after a short while I saw my brother Moshe being caught and taken forcibly to the German truck that drove all the arrested men to one of the camps, in this case the Halobiczik camp.

In the first three months the *Judenrat* used to organize food parcels that were sent to all men from our town who were in the camps. The number of the detained men amounted to hundreds. Traveling by coach from our village to the labor camps took twelve hours. This food program did not last long, however; soon the resources were exhausted, and the *Judenrat* had to discontinue the program so that, in addition to the bad hygienic conditions, now we also had a food shortage, which severely weakened the prisoners and made them more susceptible to diseases, especially typhus. The lice multiplied rapidly and transferred the typhus disease, and every sick man, who was unable to 'contribute' his share to the German war effort, was immediately killed. He was shot in the head!

Soon my brother Moshe was infected with typhus and was shot dead by a German SS man. He was murdered and buried in a mass grave somewhere in the forest.

We did not receive this information immediately. The Germans concealed the atrocities from the general public and especially from the Jews. To calm down the people and to prevent riots and acts of resistance, the Germans used to provide every newcomer in the camp with postcards on which he was forced to write what the Germans dictated, namely, that he is working and enjoying good health. The Germans sent the cards by mail on different occasions, so that such an encouraging card from Moshe reached us when he already was dead. . . .

In various ways we managed to get some wheat seeds, which we ground into flour, and mother used it to bake tasteless, flat bread. To us it tasted like paradise, a sensation that only people suffering from hunger could have. The feeling of hunger accompanied us all the time because a Jew could never get enough food, not even for money. . . .

When we could bring home potato peels that had been discarded at some public kitchen or any other place, and mother could rinse it with water and cook it into a mash, we felt like we were celebrating a feast, and if we also managed to bring a handful of wheat seeds and grind it to flour, the day became a real festival.

We would grind the wheat in a primitive handmill, which I had built from granite with the aid of two friends, using a drawing that my father had prepared and mainly from what I had seen in some farmer's house in the nearby village.

I don't know why such a primitive handmill, something like a museum exhibit, was used in a farmer's house. It was a utensil that hadn't been used for years. . . .

In any case, I built such a handmill from granite, and it was used at home.

I mentioned that we used to get wheat seeds in some strange ways. One way—not only to get wheat seeds—was exchanging goods with the Gentiles.

In the beginning we exchanged all the clothing items that we had, from a shoelace to an overcoat, for food. This barter took place to an extent that did not satisfy the hungry but enabled us to survive rather than dying from hunger. With time, we ran short of belongings, and nothing was left to 'sell'. At this point, we began—at first only the children because the adults were ashamed to do this—to plunder the houses of those whom the Germans had 'transferred' from the village to 'new settlements'. At the time we did not know that this resettling simply meant extermination! The Germans allowed the deportees to take with them a limited amount of belongings, whereas their main property was left behind, and we looted and exchanged these things for food.

But this too was limited until . . .

Until the *actions* began. In these operations, many people were simultaneously deported from the village, and many apartments were abandoned full of belongings, which the Ukrainians were glad to exchange for food. In the beginning we had no idea exactly about where the people were taken in the *actions*, but soon people sent by the community returned and reported that the deportees were sent directly to the death camp of Belzec!

Using the belongings of those sent to the death camps in exchange for food was not easy for us. But this was the reality at the time. And who else could enjoy these things? The dead?

Of course, this was not my only alternative to get hold of food for our family. I did not reject any chance to work.

For example, I helped Yitzhak, the *Shtrickdreier* (rope winder). The Gentile farmers brought Yitzhak linen, and he made ropes in different sizes from it. The ropes served for horse harnesses or for any other use, as ordered by the Gentile who had brought the linen. The rope-winding was done with an old and primitive manual machine that was operated by turning a wheel with a handle. This was hard work, and I could not do it for more than two or three hours a time, so Yitzhak would replace used to replace me with another child. For the work, Yitzhak paid me in food products that the Ukrainians had brought him as a payment for the rope winding.

The house that we lived in was a long, single-story building that housed some thirty families. This house was the last in the row of ghetto buildings and was about one hundred yards from the forest. By the way, our area had many deep and thick forests that the Germans were afraid to enter. . . .

As was customary, the houses usually had names, and our house was known as *Kapalowka*. Apart from being close to the forest, it was also adjacent to the main street, Sobieski Street, named for the Polish king John III Sobieski.

I am working at a flour mill

One day the *Judenrat* announced that all ghetto inhabitants, hundreds of families, including our big house with its thirty families, would have to receive thousands of additional Jews who were being transferred to our ghetto from nearby villages, such as Botzeznof, Strosof, and others, the names of which I don't remember.

The Kapalowka was already overcrowded, but we had no choice, of course. This was a German order, and an argument with them would certainly end with a shot in the head. To accommodate tens of additional families, we had to remove the furniture from the apartments and make room for wooden settees, arranged one upon the other. A two-room apartment, in which our family—my mother, my father, little Zipporah, and I—lived, in addition to the original family of seven persons, now contained twenty people in all!

Obviously and understandably, such overcrowding caused diseases, for which bugs and lice were mainly responsible, especially the latter, which spread typhus. As no drugs were available, typhus usually caused death.

And this was the exact intent of the Germans—to cause the death of as many Jews as possible until the Germans were ready to begin the mass extermination of Jews with gases.

When rumors began to spread about the forthcoming *action*, I worked for a very rich Ukrainian woman, whose husband lived in America. She had a big, six-story house, at a distance of about two-hundred yards from the ghetto.

As I have already mentioned the term *action* a few times, I should explain its meaning before going on with my story. In Yiddish, the common meaning of the word *aktie* is a share. A person buys, for instance, a share in a factory, becomes a shareholder and receives dividends, that is, his part of the profits, if any, at the end of the year. But *aktie* also means action, normally referring to a positive deed. The German *Aktion* referred to concentrating the Jews in a certain place and transferring them—mainly by train—to a death camp. For the Jews, *action* stopped being a share or anything positive at all. For them *action* meant—death! Death on a large scale!

I am turning the wheel and winding ropes

Let us now return to that rich Ukrainian woman. The Germans confiscated her big house and it became a military hospital. They left her with a three-room apartment in the back of the building. The house was surrounded by a large garden with vegetables and fruit trees, but my main job was to take care of her two cows in the garden. I also cleaned the cowshed and collected manure for the gardening. For this work I received food for my family. Unfortunately, there wasn't always work for me in that house.

Rumors about a forthcoming *action* in our village were becoming more and more frequent. At the time we did not yet know how to react to this. Sure, *actions* had already taken place in other communities, but we did not know their significance.

One evening, on returning home, my father told me that a rumor persists about a forthcoming *action* planned for tomorrow. "Go and sleep in the house of that Ukrainian woman," he suggested. "No doubt you will find some kind of hiding place there without her even knowing, so that she will not be able to reveal it to the Germans, even unintentionally." I hid a few nights in the yard of the Gentile woman, but as nothing happened, I would return in the morning to the ghetto. I asked my little sister to come with me and sleep in the yard of the Ukrainian woman, but she refused. She insisted on staying with mother!

Then, after a few nights of waiting for the *action* that didn't take place—It took place!

4

The first *action* in our village took place on November 5, 1942. It started at 3 a.m. I was sleeping in the yard of Mrs. Haritszin, the Ukrainian woman, hiding inside an 8-foot high haystack.

The woman had let a room, including meals, to two young students who were, of course, great anti-Semites like all, or most, young Ukrainians at the time.

Then, at three in the morning, in my hiding place deep in the haystack, I heard sounds of shooting from the direction of the village. Shots, cries, screams, mainly of women and children, and even though I did not see what was going on and I did not even know what an *action* looked like, as this was the first *action* in our village, Trembowla, I trembled from fear and concern for my parents and for my little sister.

This went on for many hours until noon. I had no watch, but I guessed the hour from the position of the sun and the light, as far as I was able to see from the haystack. At this point, one of the two students, a boy about 17 years old, decided to go out and prepare lessons in the pleasant winter sun. He sat down on the carriage that stood near the haystack, with its shaft protruding into the stack.

The student sat on the carriage seat—the coachman's seat—and, either rejoicing at the calamity or just out of boredom, was humming a song that I knew was anti-Semitic.

He rocked and moved his body which, in turn, caused the shaft to move and almost hit my head. I did not dare to shout, and I was even afraid of crawling out and escaping, because the *sheigetz* would notice me, chase and catch me, and then hand me over to the Germans. Therefore, I shrunk even more to prevent the shaft from hurting me.

This, and the concern for my parents and my sister, made that day really infernal. The young Ukrainian's singing became louder and merrier, the sounds of the shots and screams were horrifying, and I shrunk in the haystack and trembled out of fear. Finally, in the afternoon, the air cooled down and the *sheigetz* decided to return indoors. I waited another four hours until dark and until the shooting ended and carefully came out of my hiding place. I drank water—much water—looked here and there, but I didn't see anyone. Neither Jew nor Gentile. Despite my hunger—well, I was already used to hunger—I returned to my hiding place in the haystack. I spent the whole night there, and the next morning I overheard a conversation between some Ukrainians.

"Yesterday they still caught Jews," were the first words that I heard, "but today it's quiet. Anybody remaining after yesterday's *action* will be free until the next time."

"Which will come, with God's help," I heard the voice of the other Ukrainian, "very soon so we can get rid of those Jewish parasites, with the help of the Germans."

The two went away and I dared to come out of the haystack and I sneaked into the ghetto.

I was seriously worried about my family. Entering the ghetto, I met Jews, but everyone was occupied with his own misfortune, so I didn't ask anybody about the fate of my family.

Nobody was in our house. I waited until my father finally arrived carrying a pot of soup, which he had obtained from the public kitchen that the Judenrat kept for the needy—and who wasn't? A plate with soup—from this I understood that mother and little Zipporah'le had been caught by the Germans and taken to the transport together with the rest of the tenants who had not managed to escape and hide.

As it was generally believed that the Germans were looking only for young men who could work, and that the Germans had no need for women, children, and old people, my father had hidden in the bunker of a nearby house. As the Germans already had their full quota of Jews for this transport—3000—they stopped searching, and thus my father remained alive.

After eating some of the thin soup that my father had brought, I went out and joined the looters. Like the others, I too brought home various items left by those who had been caught in the *action*. The Gentiles gladly 'bought' these things in exchange for some food. . . .

At the time we did not know exactly what would happen to the transport, but the *Judenrat* hired two Gentiles to follow the transports to Belzec. The Gentiles returned with bad news that shook the Jews in the ghetto, even though rumors had circulated about what went on in these places, but people had refused to believe.

And how could one believe that the worst is happening:

An abominable and complete genocide was being carried out!

Not only the Jews of our ghetto were transferred to Belzec but also the Jews of Lvov, Krakow, Tarnopol, Stanislawow, and Przemysl, as well as many small villages in the area, were taken to Belzec.

No doubt remained any more that the Jews were being exterminated and that nobody was supposed to survive. The first *action* would be followed by additional *actions*—that we knew. When? Nobody knew that. We knew, but we could not run away! Where could one go, when the entire Gentile population was hostile, and after all attempts to hide, the fugitive would finally be caught and delivered to the Germans for money or for some food products?

• • •

We didn't know the fate of my mother and Zipporah'le then. But a few days later, a young girl, who had been in that transport and had managed to escape from the very entrance to

the death camp—I have forgotten her name—returned, and she told us about the last hours of my mother and sister.

With the help of the Ukrainian 'volunteers' and assisted by the *Jewish police*, the Germans brought the poor people, who were walking to the railway platform while being beaten with rifle butts. Three thousand Jews, heavily guarded by the Germans, were concentrated there, waiting for the train to arrive. Any attempt to escape from this encirclement—and there were a few such attempts—would result in a skull crushed with a rifle butt or a burst of gunfire through the body.

There, while sitting on the ground together with all other prisoners, my sister Zipporah began to escape in an unknown direction. Though she was only eight and very much attached to her mother, she instinctively grasped that something bad was happening. At the time, small children knew everything. A horror situation prevails, the Germans concentrate the Jews to deport them to an unknown destination, though rumors say it is the way to death.

"Feigele!" my mother cried out in terror, rising and beginning to run after the child. "Come back! Come back immediately!" but the child just looked at her mother and continued to run.

Mother followed her. A German soldier halted my mother, threatened her with his rifle and ordered her to return to her place.

But the *yiddishe mama* (the Jewish mother) did not pay heed to the soldier, although he was blond, had blue eyes, and smiled. Screaming, she continued to run after her little daughter, and then the German executed his threat. He swung his rifle butt on the head of the Jewish mother and crushed her skull. My mother collapsed instantly and a pool of blood formed beneath her.

"Take her away from here!" the German shouted to the Jews near him. "Take away the dirty Jewess before she contaminates the place with her blood!"

Somebody opened his suitcase, in which he had packed some things the Germans had allowed him to take—anyway at the entrance to the death camp they would anyway rob everyone of

all his belongings–and took out a white shirt to wrap the bleeding head. My mother herself was already unconscious and she was silent; only her arms were stretched out in the direction where Zipporah'le had run.

The people held her thus until the train arrived and they could take her with them into the wagon. The Ukrainian policemen seized Zipporah'le and threw her into another wagon.

As far as we knew, the journey from our town to Belzec lasted two to three days. Mother probably died in the wagon in great agony. On arrival at the camp, the people were driven into the gas chambers in groups, and among them was my little sister.

Out of our large family numbering about a hundred and fifty persons, only my father and myself, and possibly three more, now survived.

• • •

The second *action* in our village took place five month later, on April 7, 1943, when I was already twelve years old. That is, chronologically twelve years old but much older in experience and the struggle for survival. Actually, these months passed in a state where you were forced, like all the other Jews, to stick to every thin and dirty slice of bread, like anything that a Jewish man could eat but was rejected by any animal, including the pig. I wanted to leave the ghetto to go the Aryan side, where nobody was seized in *actions*. But everywhere I turned stood a German who pointed his rifle at me and shouted "*Jude zurück*," (Jew, go back!) The ghetto was surrounded by a thick cordon of Germans. One of the Germans was so close to me that he could have easily shot and killed me. As far as possible, the Germans refrained from shooting Jews in the streets, however, because they had to bring a certain quota of Jews to the transport train and were not allowed to reduce the number.

Across the road, just opposite the ghetto, was a deserted building that had served as a school. I noticed that near one of its corners stood a huge, 7-meter-long tanker. For some reason,

the Russians who had used it did not succeed in taking it with them when they retreated.

Somehow I managed to slip away from the ghetto and sneak into the tanker. At the end of the tanker, I noticed a wide opening of about 60 centimeters that turned upward. I climbed to the end—the tanker leaned against the wall with the opening pointing up—and crawled inside. The tanker contained a stinking liquid, probably water diluted with solar oil or gasoline, to a level of about one foot. I advanced in this liquid to the far end and stopped in the corner.

When the *action* began, the Germans disconnected the electric power in the ghetto, but after I had spent some time in the tanker, the sun rose and there was light.

Searching for people who were hidden, the Germans had passed the tanker twice. I could hear them talking outside. I also heard the voices of the *Jewish policemen*. The time was already ten thirty, as I could hear one of them telling the other. The third time, the Germans stopped at the tanker, and one of them said they should check the inside of the tank because, after all, some Jews might be hiding in it.

The Germans found the opening easily, and one of them turned on his torch to look inside, but he hurried to move away because of the terrible smell. Soon another German climbed up and fired his Schmeisser submachinegun. Then he lighted his torch and shouted: "Jews, come out!" I, of course, remained silent.

A *Jewish policeman* joined the German and called: "You there, come out, come out. I can see you!"

I don't know if I believed him because it was dark inside and the torch did not light my face. I did not really believe he saw me. But what I feared was that they would go on shooting and would hit me. Therefore, I approached the opening to get out, hoping that once outside I would find a way to escape. Strong hands seized me at the opening and pulled me out. They asked me where other Jews were hidden.

Of course I did not know, and even if I had known, I would not have revealed the information. One of the *Jewish policemen*

held my arm and the other one walked beside me, while the two Germans followed from behind, their weapons ready. They took me to a place where Jews were held before being sent away. It turned out that the concentration place was a large empty square, where the weekly district fair of the Ukrainian farmers took place every Tuesday.

At this point, I did not know were they would take me. I asked the *Jewish policeman* in a low voice so that the German wouldn't hear me. The policeman explained to me that I shouldn't be afraid. Because I was young and healthy, I would be sent to work, and he warned me not even to think of escaping.

"If you only move," he warned me, "the German immediately fires the Schmeisser at you and kills you. They will take you to a place where there are other Jews and you will not be alone. You will be among Jews, work, and get food."

The concentration place was a long building not far from the Ganzena river that flows through our village. The river is beautiful, at some places up to 100 yards wide and up to 13 feet deep. The river, where the people of Trembowla used to swim in the summer, joins the Dnestr river in Romania.

We reached a hillside that sloped down to a large ground. At the end of the slope stood armed Germans and dogs. While we still were on the hill, one of the Germans behind me shouted to a soldier downhill that he is sending me to him. He threatened to shoot me should I try to escape, and then he pushed me down the hill. I ran until I reached the German below. He ordered me to go to the concentration point itself. On my way, I passed stands on which the farmers used to display their merchandise on fair days. The Germans had placed, in typical German order, clothes, shoes, eyeglasses, watches, penknives, and various other personal items on these stands. There a German ordered me to undress, to take out everything I had in my pockets, and to put the things on the proper stands. I didn't have much in my pockets but parting from my mouth organ was hard for me, so I pretended that I put it in the heap of mouth organs but actually concealed it in my hand. Suddenly I stopped and began to

whistle. I can't explain why I whistled. Possibly out of fear or shock.

The German let me whistle—it was a tune from a Strauss waltz that I knew from my music lessons at school. The German allowed me to complete the tune and then burst into laughter, probably thinking that "The Jewish boy must be crazy. A few hours before his death—he certainly knows when and whereto the Jews will be taken from here, to their death—he finds the courage to whistle a tune."

Then the German led me to a place where some three thousand Jews were concentrated, crowded on the floor of the long building. To facilitate guarding and to prevent escape attempts, the Jews were ordered to sit. Most guards were Germans, but some were Ukrainians in blue uniforms as compared with the dark green German uniforms.

It was very noisy. Shouting and crying. Some Jews were from different places outside Trembowla. Students of an entire *yeshiva* with their rabbi, who were reciting psalms all the time. This was already the second *action*, so we knew our destination well—by train to the Belzec death camp. But this time was different. The war in Russia had not proceeded as successfully as planned, and because Belzec was very close to the old Polish-Russian border, the Nazis had destroyed the camp completely, doing their best to conceal all traces of their murderous activities. Therefore, we were not transported to Belzec.

Shouting and beating with rifle butts and setting on the terrifying dogs, the Germans arranged us in rows of four, and we started to walk—the death march, as it was called—in the direction of the river. Women held the hands of their small children and carried their babies. Guarding was extremely strict. The response to any escape attempt was immediate shooting to kill.

I remember that when we reached the river, a girl began to run, probably to cross the river. She was already in the water, but gunfire hit her and she was killed.

When approaching the wooden bridge, one of three bridges that crossed the river in our village, I overheard young people beside me whispering in Polish that trying to escape was worthwhile. The only risk was to be killed with a bullet, but in any case we were going to be killed!

And indeed, as we reached the end of the bridge, the flight started. Young men, boys and girls, including me. The guards responded with strong fire, and the number of casualties was very high. Those who were hit but did not die on the spot were shot in the head by a German or by a Ukrainian. Many were killed, but a few managed to reach the thick vegetation on the river bank and to continue their escape as far as possible. It was every man for himself!

I ran like mad. I heard the shots and the whistling of the bullets that passed above and around me, but I went on running until I reached a field with high crop. I lay there on the ground until dark. Then I got up and, barefoot and only in underwear, I walked back to the ghetto, where I met my father.

The *action* was over, and anyone who had survived was free for the time being—until the next 'doomsday'. In the ghetto I was told that the people who did not escape had to march about an hour and a half to a large hill known as *Tlebanowka*. This hill was in a small village, about half-a-kilometer from the railway track, which meant that the Jews were not taken to the railway station.

Two days before the second *action*, an engineering-corps unit arrived at the hill to dig large, deep pits—a huge mass grave for three thousand people. This was the quota of the second *action*! All the Jews were brought here, in an orderly, accurate, and systematic German manner, all were shot by the men of the *Einsatzgruppen* (task forces) and were then thrown directly into the pits. Those who were hit but did not die were buried alive. . .

Here too many tried to escape, but all were shot. Those not hit were caught by one of the wild dogs that the Germans kept with them. But the freedom in the ghetto did not last long. Already on the day after the massacre on the Tlebanowka hill, the Jewish policemen went out to seize everyone that was still

alive. The Jewish policemen were accompanied by Ukrainian policemen, armed with rifles, while the Jews carried only clubs.

I was seized too. We were told that we would be sent to work. And, indeed, we were loaded onto trucks, given enough food, and transported to the hill of death, Tlebanowka.

Arriving there, I couldn't control myself and burst into tears. A Jewish policeman tried to calm me down by saying that the Germans would not tolerate anyone crying and might shoot the person. I overcame my crying and stopped. And why did I cry? Some 400 to 500 corpses were scattered on the surrounding hill. Children, boys and girls, and even young men and women. Those who had tried to escape from the hill of death but did not make it.

Now it was our task to drag the dead—women, children and men—into a big pit that had been dug for them. To a mass grave! Jews holding tongs stood at the grave. It was their job to open the mouth of every dead person and to extract his or her gold teeth. The Germans needed gold to conduct the war.

"You must gather all the scattered dead. You will not go home before you have buried all the dead and covered the graves with earth," the German said. Also there were some elderly Jews who said that you must honor the dead and not drag them on the ground, so four people should carry each corpse by the arms and legs to the grave. The Germans and the Ukrainians felt that the process was slow.

A German shouted: "Every adult drags one corpse, and two children drag one corpse!" As I was twelve years old, I dragged corpses together with another boy, who possibly was eleven years old. The adult Jews were given ropes with an iron hook. I saw this with my own eyes. They forcibly opened the mouth of the dead, inserted the hook, and then dragged him. After dragging all the dead to the grave, we covered it with earth.

We completed this horrible work late that evening, and then the trucks returned us to the ghetto.

On that very day, a bill was presented to the *Judenrat*: to pay for the ammunition, the gasoline, the transportation. . . . The *Judenrat* had to pay for the cruel massacre.

I managed to hide in my pocket two slices of bread from what we had been given and brought them home to my father. The coming days in the ghetto proceeded in a routine manner. I collected things from the houses of the murdered Jews and exchanged them for food from the Gentiles.

Now the ghetto looked empty and solitary. Only a few remained there, and it was clear to all of us that the end would come and that nobody would survive. Meanwhile, a seventeen-year-old boy appeared, who had been in a labor camp. He had become infected with typhus and managed to escape and reach the ghetto. On returning to the ghetto, he found out that his entire family had perished. Since we knew him and his family from before, we took him home with us. Soon I too was infected with typhus. The name of the boy was Leiser Schwalbnest. He survived the holocaust and came to Israel. He now has a family and lives in Nahariya.

In the ghetto was an improvised hospital with no drugs, so that the people who were hospitalized there were just waiting for death to come! One doctor and four nurses served in this hospital. Every night, about seven to eight people died there. I spent ten days in the hospital, without food or drugs, so I used to lick the ice that had frozen on the window panes and ate what my father had brought me from home.

Until this day I don't know how my father did it, but he brought me and Leiser Schwalbnest potato porridge and milk. Both of us, the boy and myself, had stomach typhus, so that good food helped us to get well. In fact, of all those in our room—one room out of four in the hospital—we were the only two that survived.

Somehow the winter passed. The belongings that I had collected from the houses of the perished people helped us to buy food from the Ukrainians until spring came, and with it, the third and last *action*.

5

June 3, 1943.

The third and last *action*, which was aimed at liquidating the entire ghetto and Trembowla and all surrounding villages, took place. The turning of an area that was bustling with *Yeshivas* and *Talmud-Torahs* into *Judenfrei*—free of Jews! In this *action*, all Gentiles from the surroundings took part. Anyone who informed against a hiding Jew or seized one and delivered him to the authorities received special food items as a prize, and the Jew was executed on the spot!

After I was discharged from the hospital, it took three weeks to recover from the illness. The three weeks were devoted mostly to fighting lice. The lice penetrated everything in the body and the clothes, and we used to remove the lice from every fold in the clothes and kill them between our fingers. A disgusting job, and even today I feel disgust and nausea whenever I think of it.

And as if this 'Egyptian plague' were not enough, there was the bug problem. Every place was full of them, the settees—we lay on them on three levels—the blankets, the walls, and even the ceiling.

But food was the main problem. We received a ration of 100 grams (about 3 1/2 ounces) of bread a day. Once I went to get the bread and unintentionally ate the whole inside on the way back. Naturally everybody shouted at me when I came home.

I remember how, still before the war, we, the children, would go fishing at the river bank using a net. I did the same now. Despite the risk of being caught and shot down or sent to forced labor, I used to go fishing. The fish I managed to catch were small, but this was better than nothing! We would grind the fish in a meat mincer and make cutlets.

In short, we passed the time thus until the final *action* began.

• • •

I must interrupt my story for a while and devote a few lines to some questions that holocaust survivors have been asked over and over again since their arrival in Israel. Why did you go as lambs led to the slaughter? Why didn't you resist? Why didn't you fight?

No answer was accepted. Not even the answer that there was resistance, such as, for example, the Vilna ghetto uprising, which was the first armed revolt or one of the first, and the Warsaw ghetto uprising and others. One can understand why this answer was not accepted by those who were born or raised in Israel as free and proud individuals, who could take up arms and fight the Germans in the British army, although in Jewish units like the Jewish fighting division, the so-called "Jewish Brigade."

We in Europe were surrounded by hostile Gentiles who wished to see their countries free from Jews. And the Germans? The Nazis? For years they had been planning, properly and meticulously, the extermination of the Jews—and with the help of the Jews. This is why the Germans established Jewish councils and a Jewish police force in the occupied areas, which were particularly instrumental in the killing of their brothers. . . .

Indeed, a few cases of uprising occurred, of sudden attacks on Germans with knives or axes. Most of these cases resulted in the attacker being shot dead by another German or by a Ukrainian or a Pole, by a Lithuanian or any other collaborator. I know of an incident in which an 18-year-old boy in a forced-labor camp attacked a German soldier who was guarding him, stabbed him to death with a knife that he had concealed,

and escaped. I don't know what happened to him. I know his sister, Elka, personally. She managed to hide with the aid of Christian Poles—there were such people too—and now she lives in Israel. Cases where a Christian saved a Jew are praiseworthy because anyone caught helping a Jew was punished, regardless of the circumstances, with a death penalty!

Few Poles, however, helped Jews. Most helped the Germans, because of the reward they received or because of religious motives.

In any case, I personally blame the vast majority of the Ukrainians and the Poles as accomplices in the extermination of the Jews.

• • •

Now allow me to make another diversion from the story of the ghetto and its liquidation. I wish to say something about life in the ghetto—and I mean Jewish life.

Already at the beginning of the German occupation and before the *actions*, *matzos* for Passover were baked in the ghetto. The baking took place in our building, which was called Kapalowka because it was owned by a Jew named Kopel, who had emigrated to America before the war and was represented by an attorney.

I also took part in baking the matzos, which were round rather than square. I don't know where the meal for the matzos came from, but it was white and of high quality. The room where the matzos were baked measured 16 by 16 feet. At each of the two doors stood a guard, ready to warn of an approaching stranger. I do not know of any such incident during the time I worked there. But let me describe the baking process.

Women and twelve- to fourteen-year-old children stood at a table. Each woman received an amount of dough, about the size of a tennis ball. I had a rolling-pin for flattening the ball to a size of about ten inches. I also had a tooth-wheel with a handle for piercing the dough to get matzos with the traditional holes.

A bearded Jew, a refugee from Western Poland, which had already been occupied by the Germans since 1939, stood by the

oven. On one side of the oven a fire was kindled with wood that the children had gathered in the forest, while the matzos were baked opposite it in the oven. The work proceeded rapidly, because there is a ritual time limit for it. I worked for four days in this bakery and received matzos for the holidays. Before the German occupation we lived for two years under the Russian occupation. The Russians confiscated all private property, and all businesses became cooperatives. My father, who had been self-employed, was attached to one of the cooperatives for supplying foodstuffs.

We enjoyed a good standard of living, and our studies went well. My brother, Moshe, and I studied in a Russian school for two years. We learned Russian, a language I still know. During World War I, my father fought in the Austro-Hungarian army and was taken prisoner by the Russians, so he spent five years in Russia. He spoke Russian well and also Hungarian, and I learned Russian from him before the Russians occupied Poland. Thus my Russian was excellent.

• • •

Now let us go back to the main theme, the German occupation. We return to the day that the third *action* began.

Before the *action* started, while going to the railway station to look for some food, I saw a train with barred windows on a side track. I sneaked into one of the railroad cars and asked in Polish who the people were and where they came from! It turned out that they were Jews from Czortkow on their way to a death camp. After leaving the train, I saw two heavily armed German soldiers with automatic weapons taking position on each side of the train.

When telling my father about this, he reproached me angrily, saying that the Germans could have caught me and put me on one of those railroad cars. I tried to argue that I was not from the same town and that I would have said this to the Germans, so they would have released me! "I come across German soldiers and Ukrainian policemen every day and nobody pays attention to me!"

A railroad car with Jews on their way to Belzec

"But one day they will pay attention to you and that will be your end!" my father went on. "I forbid you to stroll in the streets!

My father forgot one thing—how would we get food without my going out to look for it?

Actually, the town functioned as usual. Life went on according to routine, more or less. Once I even came close to the cinema, and the many people standing there made me want to go inside, but I had no money for a ticket.

The main street, Sobieski Street, divided the town in half, with the whole ghetto on one side. The distance from the cinema to the ghetto was less than 500 yards. In this street traffic was heavy with carriages driven by Gentiles, as well as many pedestrians. From time to time one of the Gentiles stopped at the barbed-wire fence of the ghetto in an attempt to do business with the Jews standing behind the fence. The main thing that the Jews wanted to buy was food.

I recall three brothers who were brought to our ghetto from a small village named Bodzanow after the first *action*. I remember the name of only one, Shimon. The three were bold youngsters, who managed to sneak out of the ghetto all the time. They were butchers by profession and somehow were never caught and sent to forced labor. Shimon was about twenty and maintained good relations with the Gentiles.

I remember that one night they brought to our house three sacks of veal, wrapped in newspaper in packages of one kilo (about two pounds) each. They asked me if I wanted to earn two kilos of meat. I should get up early in the morning and ask people in various houses if they wanted to buy meat.

As I had heard from my father, many Jews in the ghetto had money. Real money, not the paper notes of the occupation power that had little or no value. Some Jews in the ghetto even managed to hide gold coins.

So, together with two other children my age, we managed to sell all the meat within three hours and, of course, I received my pay on the spot. Meanwhile the butcher boys had cleaned the place to remove any traces of meat.

I provided the brothers with a list of the people who had bought the meat and they went out to collect the money, but they never returned. I don't know where they went. It is a fact that the brothers never spent the night in the house.

I assume that somebody who didn't have the money to buy meat had informed the authorities, and in the evening two Ukrainian policemen came to our house to investigate. They found only women and small children in the house. My father was hiding in the neighboring yard. The policemen searched for the meat, but finally they gave up and went away. I was also at home during the interrogation and the search. Later my father said that the Ukrainian policemen had probably been bribed so they did not make any serious effort to investigate the matter.

I keep promising that I will return to the story of the third *action*, but every time something interferes and diverts me from that subject.

So, the third *action* began at three in the morning. The ghetto was surrounded by a cordon of many soldiers and policemen. The electric power was disconnected and darkness prevailed. When the first shouts of "*Juden 'raus*" (Jews out!) were heard, my father and I immediately moved to a neighbor's bunker. The neighbor, Dov Wachtel, who had a large family, was an imposing figure with a noble appearance. He invited us to the bunker, a small room in the attic, just beneath the metal roof. There was room for ten people in the bunker, but at least thirty were there. Because of the overcrowding, each one pushed himself wherever he could, so my father and I were not together. Among the thirty people was a young woman with a baby in her arms. Our fate largely depended on silence. We heard the Germans and the Ukrainians running around looking for Jews. We heard shouts, we heard shots, we even heard Germans saying to one another that the smell here was suffocating. "It's because the dirty Jews ease nature on the roof rather than in the toilet," one of the Germans remarked.

The baby suddenly began to cry, which could have attracted the attention of the searchers to us. That would have been the end. From all sides the young mother was encouraged to silence

the baby and, having no choice, she simply choked the baby to death. . . . She did not decide to do so immediately. First, as I understood, she tried to leave the bunker and surrender to the Germans, but we heard them again come closer and then, not to hand us all over, she choked her baby with the pillow she held.

All in bunker were saved—but for how long?

I saw what happened, but I did not relate to it. The approach to death had become hard-hearted and cold. Immense heat prevailed in the bunker, and this was aggravated by the metal roof above us. All started to undress, and I also remained only in my underpants. The smell was also unbearable. Since it was impossible to move, everybody eased nature where he was standing. . . .

In the late afternoon we felt it had become quiet outside. The shooting and the shouting had stopped, everything was silent. We opened the lid of the bunker, and one of the girls was pushed out to see what the situation was. She came back after a while with the news that nobody was in the street and nothing could be heard of the *action*. She went out again and returned with a bucket of water and two cups. The children, including me, were the first to drink, when we suddenly heard the steps of people ascending the stairs and voices speaking Ukrainian. The Ukrainians went up and began to move around the bunker but did not find the opening.

"Get out, *Jids*!" we heard a voice in Ukrainian. "We know you are here! The terrible smell proves that there are Jews here!"

And then we heard voices of Germans shouting "*Juden 'raus! Juden 'raus*!" Jews out!

After half an hour, with no response from us, they opened fire. The bullets began to hit people around and the tumult was great. Everybody was looking for a way to get out of the bunker and escape. I managed to escape to the roof and hid among different kinds of scattered scrap and rags.

Being so anxious to hide, I placed a rusty metal kettle on my head. As I could see nothing, I was confident that nobody could see me. Here I had enough air to breathe and it was not hot or suffocating, as in the bunker. I lay there quiet waiting for dark or

until I would hear voices of Jews outside. Then I would leave my hiding place.

From previous experience we knew that, after completing the *action*, the Germans would leave and it would be safe to get out and move outside. The murderers had achieved their quota of victims for that day, and they would let the survivors alone until next time.

There were heavy steps on the roof beside me. A Ukrainian policeman kicked the kettle from over my head and ordered me to stay where I was and not to move, or else he would shoot me dead on the spot. To demonstrate this, he retreated a few steps, drew his pistol and aimed it at me. I, of course, spoke to him Ukrainian, which I knew well. I begged him not to kill me now that the Germans already had left and nobody would know what he had done. "Release me so I may live. Don't kill me!" He liked my fluent Ukrainian.

"Where did you learn such good Ukrainian?" he asked me.

"Before the German occupation we lived in the Ukrainian quarter of the suburb," I replied.

My mother, who was a clever and wise woman, as I have already indicated, sewed into a hidden place in the clothes of my brother and myself something small but valuable, which might help us to stay alive when in trouble. Moshe had taken the thing that she gave him to the forced labor camp, and she put a gold ring into my trousers. My present estimate is that the ring contained at least two ounces of gold. I now remembered that ring and offered it to the Ukrainian policeman for my release. . .

The Ukrainian responded with a humiliating laughter. "A gold ring, trousers, what are you talking about, *Jid*?" he burst out in anger. "You are naked! What trousers? What pocket?"

I explained to him that I had left the trousers in the bunker because of the terrible heat there.

"So," he said, "go back to the bunker and get the ring."

After a few steps he stopped, still aiming with the pistol. "What's this terrible smell here?" he asked grimacing. "Go in yourself and get me the ring!"

With a Ukrainian holding a pistol

I did as I had been told, returned to the bunker and fortunately found my trousers without too much searching. I handed him the trousers, but he remained standing far from me. Possibly because of the terrible smell that came from the bunker or because he was afraid I was plotting something against him.

"Take the ring out of your pocket and throw it to me!" he said.

"I can't," I answered, "it's sewn into my pocket and I can't open the stitch without a knife."

"Throw me the trousers and I'll do it!" he said.

I threw him the trousers. Using his penknife he exposed the ring and, with a wicked smile, he waved his pistol and ordered me to leave the bunker. No, I didn't believe him. I suspected that he would kill me or deliver me to the Nazis despite the ring, which he again took out of his pocket and looked at with conspicuous delight. I seized the opportunity of his lack of attention and started to run away. The roof window was open. I climbed up on the outer side of the roof. He probably heard the noise of my feet on the roof. He fired two shots in the estimated direction but did not pursue me. I jumped from a height of thirteen feet to the ground and began to run in the direction of the forest. The distance was about one hundred yards.

He had heard my footsteps on the roof and could have killed me but he didn't, despite the reason he had to do it. He could have reported that he had caught me hiding and that I had tried to escape so he had to fire at me! The orders were not to kill anyone on the spot unless it was quite necessary. Order must be maintained! The Jew must be brought to the concentration point for registration. The German order! No anarchy!

On the other hand, he wouldn't have taken me to the Germans. He knew that I had nothing to lose as I was going to die anyway, so I would have told them about the ring that he took from me. It was German government property, and he had stolen it from the German government, not from me. Apparently the Ukrainian policeman had come to the same conclusion, which is why he hesitated and was not eager to fire at me.

In short, I ran away into the forest, where I found a hiding place for the whole night. Fortunately it was summer so I didn't freeze. In the morning I came out of the forest and started to walk back to the ghetto.

On the way I met a few Jews. I asked about my father. From my conversation with them it turned out that Wachtel's two sons, Nissim and Benyamin, had managed to escape. They had not been not caught in that *action*. By the way, both now live in Israel with their families, their children, and their grandchildren! One lives in Bat-Yam, the other in Givatayim.

Yes, they told me that my father had fallen into the hands of the Germans. No, I did not weep when I got the news that I was the only survivor in the family! I did not weep because my source of tears had dried up.

I also met a young woman, Bracha Ochs. She told me that she too had hidden on that roof and had overheard my whole conversation with the Ukrainian policeman.

Naked and exhausted, with only my underpants on, I finally reached the ghetto, where I met my father who, in the midst of the tumult, had managed to escape from the Germans and reach our home in the ghetto. It was easy to find clothes and shoes in the ghetto. The houses were full of clothing and footwear, but the owners either either were no longer alive or were on their way to the death camps. The *action* was over—instead of the thousands of Jews who had lived in the ghetto before, only a few hundreds remained.

"So," I said to my father, "we survived and we need food. I am going out to collect what I can from the abandoned houses so that we can get food in exchange."

Persuading my father to let me go out was not easy. He feared that I would be caught and sent to forced labor.

"If I don't collect the things," I continued, trying to convince him, "the Gentiles will do it, and that's a pity!"

My father was too weak and depressed to go out himself and try to bring something home.

"All right," he finally said, "but be careful, look around you well, and come back before noon!"

I went out and worked hard. I also found food, ate some, and brought food for my father.

"Why are you in such a depressed mood, father," I asked him, "our troubles did not begin today or yesterday."

"Because of the rumors I hear," he answered. "According to the rumors, the Nazis are going to liquidate the ghetto."

"What do you mean exactly?" I asked.

"Take a walk around the Judenrat office and listen to what people are talking about," he said. "But be careful not to be beaten up by the Jewish police."

It had already happened that the Jewish policemen had beaten me for no reason. They were very nervous and had taken it out on me.

I went out and heard what people were saying. When I returned, I reported everything to my father. He interrupted me saying: "I already know everything. I read the announcement in the street. It's in Yiddish."

According to the announcement, the place would become *Judenfrei*, free of Jews, within three days! The Jews still living in the ghetto would be transferred to another ghetto in a village named Kopiecince.

While looking for various things, I reached Wachtel's bunker. I knew about a man who had been shot and wounded by the Germans. The Germans had probably taken him to a death camp. Only a dead Jew had remained in the house. I told my father about this, and he said that according to Jewish law you are not allowed to leave a dead person unburied, so he must be buried.

"What do you care," I argued. "In any case, we must leave the ghetto within two days." It was of no avail. My father insisted on honoring the dead. Together with my friend, Nissim Wachtel, who lived in the same house, we removed the man, who was big and heavy. We informed the *Judenrat*, and they sent Jewish policemen to take the corpse away.

All this did not especially impress me. I was already used to seeing dead people lying on the ghetto streets. People either died of hunger, diseases, or of wounds inflicted by the Germans. I

knew that we, my father and myself, were still alive, but our end would be the same. It was only a matter of time.

My father, who felt like me, spoke to me frequently about the question of survival. He taught me many things that a child is not supposed to know under normal conditions. But we were not leading a normal life. . . . The normal world, the world of yesterday, was gone and dead! He taught me that Jewish law—my father adhered strictly to Jewish law as long as it was possible—prohibited theft. But to survive, stealing food was allowed.

"Remember, if you are caught, escape on the first occasion," he told me, "and when you run, take a zigzag course to avoid being shot! Yes," he added with much devotion, "recite the prayer *Modeh ani lefanecha* every morning and the *Kriyat Shema* in the evening."

I knew these two short prayers by heart, and I also knew a few psalms.

Now let me return to the announcement that was issued to the ghetto survivors. It also said that we must reach the new ghetto in Kopiecince on our own, by car, on foot, in whatever way. The important thing was to leave the ghetto here. Anyone found here after the third day would be killed on the spot!

The survivors in our house met to take counsel. We decided to hire from the Gentiles a number of carriages that would transfer us and our belongings to the new ghetto, which was situated about 20 kilometers from here.

Then my father sat down with me and said: "Don't join me in the new ghetto, which will also be liquidated in the end! The end is drawing near, and the end means that there is no place for the Jews in this world, all Jews must die!"

He then told me that our whole family in Poland had perished. Over one hundred and fifty persons! Uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, and so on. The Schechter, Toren, Ronis, Meiman, Dagan, Krentzel, and Ashkenazi families and more—I don't remember all the names, though father mentioned them all.

"But why shouldn't I join you in the new ghetto?" I asked. "What should I do?"

"I have heard that a group of young people is planning to go into the forest," father replied. "Join them. I would have done it too, but I am not strong enough any more. All sufferings and hardships have defeated me."

He also instructed me to take advantage of the dark and to go to the land parcel of the Polish farmer, Malik, who had been friendly with my father in the period before the occupation. The land of this Pole borders on the forest. "There, in the forest, if you proceed about one kilometer, you will meet the group of young people you should join."

"I will go by carriage to the other ghetto," my father finished his words. "Wait for me in the forest near the land of Malik, and I will come to bid farewell!"

6

I waited, but my father did not come. I lost my patience waiting, particularly because I was afraid of being discovered by the Gentiles, who would have delivered me to the Germans. So I got out of my hiding place and began to walk deeper into the forest, hoping to meet Jews, but I did not meet anyone. Later that evening I turned back in the direction of Malik, the Pole. Not wanting to attract attention, I knocked on the door very quietly. Finally Malik came out. It turned out that he knew about the liquidation of our ghetto, so he was not surprised to see me.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I can't have you in my house because we may be under surveillance. There are many informers and the Ukrainians suspect the Poles in particular and do not trust us."

He pulled me into the field with the high crop. We sat down there, and he told me that my father had visited him at noon, relating the new developments and telling him about me.

"Because of the informers, your father could not stay in the area and he hurried away. He asked me to tell you to go into the forest where you will meet other Jews."

Good Malik also asked me not to approach his house, particularly not in daylight. He promised to leave food for me on the border of his land and the forest.

"God forbid," he said, "that anyone should see me meeting with a Jew. They would inform against me and cause my death."

I remained silent for a long while without taking my eyes off the good Pole, troubled by the thought that I would never see my father again.

"Your father also said," Malik went on, "that you look like a Gentile. And you surely do. Your blond hair and your blue eyes, and your excellent Ukrainian. I really believe that you will manage to live among the Gentiles if you are careful and behave like one of them and don't show any signs of being a Jew."

He also taught me my Ukrainian name, my parents' names and my 'past' and anything a Ukrainian boy should know. He also taught me some prayers of the Ukrainian church. Before we parted, he tested me about my Ukrainian origin.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Vladimir Ostinyuk," I answered.

This was the name of a *sheigetz* who had studied with me in the music class at the school. A thirteen-year old boy, like I was then. Thirteen years old without a *bar mitzvah* ceremony, without *tefillin* and without the *haftarah.*

A child my age was exempt from carrying various documents. Malik invented a cover story for me and even tested me thoroughly to make sure I remember everything and would not make any mistakes.

According to the story, the Germans had taken my parents to work in Germany, while I was left in some village. Malik also told me the name of the village, far from there and not in the region.

He also told me that my father had gone to the ghetto in the village of Kopiecince. I left good Malik and walked into the forest. I came back early in the morning and found bread and cheese that Malik had left for me. Then I began removing myself from the village because it was dangerous to remain too close.

I went into the forest that seemed to have no end. All the way I was looking for Jews, but there was no sign of them. Fortunately it was June 1943, so it was warm even at night. Fearing that I would go astray in the forest and not find my way

back to the field, I did not dare to advance too deep into the forest.

In addition to the food, Malik had left me two matchboxes that my father had given him for me. He also warned me not to tell adult Jews that I had matches.

"There is a great shortage of matches," he said, "and they will take them from you to light cigarettes." He also warned me to protect the matches from moisture. In our area it rained a lot in June, so I should protect and save my matches.

During the day I sat in the forest, hiding in the thick vegetation, and I walked around looking for Jews only at night. During the day I slept on a couch of leaves to avoid sleeping on the moist ground. I changed my location daily so that nobody would be able to find me.

Finally, after much wandering, I gave up my hope of finding Jews in the forest. Maybe there were no more Jews? Maybe they had all been killed? Only I had survived! Out of despair I decided to go to the new ghetto where I might find my father.

For about two weeks I slowly advanced in the forest—a thirteen-year old child alone—and then I found myself near a village named Podhicki. I had run out of food long ago—there was enough water—and lived on seeds that I picked in the fields and roasted on coal from a small fire that I made in the forest. I lit a very small fire so there would be no smoke that might attract attention to me. I extinguished the fire, put the seeds on the coal and had a tasty dish with a pleasant smell. The whole process took me no more than fifteen minutes!

I also found various nuts and different varieties of sweet fruit in the forest. Life in the forest was very hard, however. I was constantly afraid of coming across Gentiles who might catch me and deliver me to the Germans. But a kind of magic was also present in our forests. No wild beasts were there, only squirrels and various harmless insects, and the air was filled with the twittering of different birds. And the wonderful odor of the trees and the different varieties of plants.

When you are alone in a forest, you gradually learn to know it and find your way. Here and there you find a clearing, corners and pieces of land without trees, only grass and small bushes. The tops of the tall trees prevent the sun from penetrating, and in this half darkness you imagine that you are the only human being in the entire world. However, I was not really able to enjoy this natural beauty and tranquillity. I was constantly afraid of being detected by Gentiles, who would enter the forest—in daytime, not at night—to gather wood for heating, either for themselves or to sell to others.

A pleasant fact that must be pointed out was that in the forest I managed to get rid of the lice that had annoyed me. There were many water streams in which I could wash my body without soap without any restriction on water. The parcel that my father had left with Malik contained underwear for changing, so I could wash and dry my underwear from time to time and keep myself clean. Delousing was a disgusting job, which still nauseates me when remembering it, but it was very helpful at that time. I used to kill the lice and the eggs in the heat of the small fire I built. It was good that my father had shaved my head, so the lice had no place to multiply, but what would happen when my hair grew again?

Who knows—before that the Messiah might come, the dead would resurrect and I would meet my mother, my little sister, and my brother again! I believed in the coming of the Messiah and expected him every day. My father and the *melamed* (teacher) in the *cheder* had told me so, this was my hope at that time—and the hope of all, or at least most, of the Jews who were still alive. For what other redemption awaited us from the side of the Germans?

But, meanwhile, the Messiah was delayed and I was getting weaker and my body was full of small wounds. This condition had probably resulted from my abnormal nutrition, even if I had added to my menu the mushrooms I picked in the forest and roasted on the fire. A real delicacy. So I decided to get out of the forest and go to the ghetto where my father was. In the forest I did not find the Jews my father had thought would

be there, and I could not stay alone any more. Certainly not now, as I was running out of matches after more than a month alone in the forest. Without matches I would not be able to light a fire. . . .

While walking in the field in what I estimated was the direction of Kopiecince, a Gentile appeared before I had noticed him.

"Come here, boy!" he called.

He asked where I came from and where I was going. I told him the story Malik had taught me. "I am looking for work," I finished my story.

"Work?" He gave me a long look and scratched his head. "In fact, I need a boy like you for work, and I would take you if I were sure that you are not a Jew. You don't look Jewish, but anyway, take down your trousers and show me if you are circumcised or not."

"That won't be necessary," I said. Because I was depressed and desperate, I somehow was not afraid of him and I admitted to being Jewish.

Hearing this, he asked me to come into the field with him, so that we would not be seen together. I did as he told me, and after a few minutes of conversation, he told me to wait for him. He would only go and bring me some food from his carriage.

I did not suspect him of trying to deliver me to the Germans, but I watched him. Carefully, looking around to make sure that he was not seen, he went to the carriage that stood about 50 yards away and brought some bread, cheese, and a bottle of water, wrapped in a piece of cloth.

While I was eating, he said that I should say I was from the area of the town of Zhitomir in the Russian part of the Ukraine.

"By the way, do you know Russian?" he asked.

"Very well," I replied. "During the two years of Russian occupation I learned Russian at school."

After a few more minutes of conversation, he advised me to stay in the field until morning. Then he would bring me more

food and a Ukrainian prayer book, which would support my disguise as a Ukrainian boy.

About my intent to go to the Kopiecince ghetto he said that I should not do so. That ghetto as well would soon be liquidated and all Jews would be killed.

"It would be a pity," he said. "Why should you die?"

Somehow I believed in the honesty of this Gentile, and I did not suspect that he might hand me over to the Germans. I stayed in the field until morning and, indeed, he came and brought me what he had promised . . . On a piece of paper he had written down the Ukraininan morning and evening prayers, and he instructed me to learn them by heart.

I remained another day and night in the field. During this time I learned the prayers by heart. The next time he came, he tested me, gave me some more food and water, and wished me farewell. He also cut my hair, as I had asked him to do, with a device he had brought with him. You could find such a device in every farmhouse, where the family members used it to cut each other's hair.

"Walk only at night," was his advice, "and keep close to the road when you walk in a field so you don't get lost and will always be able to hide in time."

I identified the road easily by the telephone and telegraph poles. The roads themselves were in bad condition and full of pits because they had been constructed many years ago and nobody had cared to maintain them properly. Most of the traffic consisted of carriages driven by horses. Motor vehicles, mostly trucks, were rare and passed about once an hour.

Despite the Gentile's warning, I intended to reach the ghetto where my father was. I had already been on my way for three days. I was tired and exhausted, and meanwhile I had also run out of food. Finally I sat down and fell asleep.

I probably slept for some twenty hours. When I woke up, I looked around and saw a village far away. It was called Malinisky.

"I'll enter that village," I told myself, "and try to get a job."

I walked in the direction of the village and met carriages with people who spoke Polish. Nobody paid heed to me. I was like one of them and did not look different at all.

I approached a yard where a woman stood washing her laundry. "Could I please have some water," I addressed her in Ukrainian. She gave me a cup of water.

"I guess you have come for a visit from the neighboring village," she said.

Since all villagers knew each other, she understood that I was not from her village. She also asked me how I knew that she was Ukrainian. In that village two thirds were Polish and only one third Ukrainian.

"Are you Ukrainian, too?" she asked.

I answered "Yes," and added that I was not from the neighboring village, but from a far-off place, and that I was looking for work.

At this point she told me she was a widow and that she had a 12-year old daughter who tended her cows instead of going to school.

"I could employ you," she suggested, "so that my daughter could go back to school." I agreed, and she went on: "I have only two cows. There is not much work to do here. In the morning you will put the cows out to pasture until noon. After I milk the cows, you will have to clean the cowshed and remove the manure. For this you will get food and a bed."

I nodded my head again, and she continued:

"Times are bad now and I am poor and don't have very good food. You will get plenty of vegetables and potatoes and bread and cabbage soup. I cannot promise you meat. But I promise to buy you new shoes with wooden soles. I will also sew you clothes from fabric we make ourselves. Blue fabric. For each season—a season here lasts nine months—you will get two sacks of grain." Then she stopped and observed me carefully.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Vladimir Ostinyuk," I answered.

"A typical Ukrainian name. I will call you just Vladik," she said. "Where are your father and mother, Vladik? Tell me everything so I can get to know you better."

I told her I was from Zhitomir, but I had been with my parents in Trembowla, where my father had worked on the construction of an airfield. The Russians had transferred many men with their families from the Ukraine to this village to build the airfield.

"When the Germans came," I went on with my fabricated story, "they sent all Ukrainians to work in Germany. They took them for a year, as they were told by the Germans. Since all Germans had been mobilized, they needed people to work in industry and agriculture. My parents left me in an orphanage in the village of Alpace, but the food was bad there, and they used to beat us, so I ran away."

"Aren't they going to look for you?" the woman asked.

"I don't think so," I answered. "I already ran away many times, and when I returned nobody asked me anything. I used to get away for two to three weeks and come back."

The whole story was false, of course, but it fit me. "The last time," I went on, "I told them that I would look for work and after finding a steady job, I would write to tell them where I was so that they could tell my parents after their return from Germany."

"Write the letter and I'll give you money for the stamp," she said.

Meanwhile her daughter, Marina, came back from the pasture. A graceful Gentile girl with light complexion and blond hair and two long tresses, tied with two red ribbons.

"This is our new *pastuch* (shepherd)," the woman introduced me to her daughter, a girl my age. "Now you can go back to school."

The Ukrainian woman left us in the yard and returned a few minutes later to ask me to come in and eat. Immediately on entering the room, I remembered to take off my cap. I had been taught that when you enter a room with Christian icons and various pictures of Jesus and Mary, you must take off your hat.

To them it looked natural that I did so. The food was simple but tasty. Potato soup, carrots and other vegetables, and home-made black, fresh bread. In the villages, people used to bake their own bread.

The soup was served to me in a deep black plate, home-made as well. I was not aware that if you have not eaten warm food for a long time, you should not eat much the first time. As a result, I got a stomach ache and had to hurry to the toilet, which in the villages was outside the house in the corner of the yard. The toilet was a primitive device. A sitting board above a deep pit. There was no toilet paper, and torn pieces of newspaper were used. I had diarrhoea and I threw up everything that I had eaten. Of course, I did not tell them anything about this. At supper I refused to eat the bread and cheese they served me, telling them I was not hungry. I only drank the home-made flower tea with a lump of sugar. This tea was called *lipowicwit.*

In the evening I went to the cowshed and milked the two cows. I did this in a quite reasonable time. One of the cows produced a lot of milk because she had recently given birth. I did not see the calf. They had probably sold it or had it killed. The cow gave 12 liters of milk a day, which was a lot in those days. In Israel today, we milk cows mechanically rather than manually, but in those times you had to keep the cow eating while milking her so that she would stand still and not disturb you.

Flies irritated the cow, and she drove them away with her tail, so after the milking one had to strain the milk again. The milk was kept in clay jars, and even in summer there was no risk of souring. From the milk the woman used to make by hand butter, cream, cheese, and sour milk for drinking. The remaining cheese was salted, and once in two weeks the salted cheese was sent with the neighbor to the town market.

I did all the farmhouse work, as though I had been born in a farmer family. My father, who was a wise man and could foresee events, had prepared me for a situation like this. In fact, he taught me everything so that, thanks to him, I practically

became a Ukrainian boy. But mentally, I remained a Jewish boy, loyal to his people and to his *torah*. . . .

At bedtime, I used to kneel before the icons of Jesus and recite the evening prayer that every Gentile child knew by heart. In the Ukrainian school where I had studied, we were only a few Jewish students, three boys and two girls; the Jews were exempted from the otherwise compulsory prayer, but we had to stand up and be present at the prayer. Had I known then what would happen to me, I would have learned the prayer by heart.

With the cows in the pasture

When I took the cows to their pasture, I met Ukrainian children who did the same. To pass the time and to prevent them from asking me embarrassing questions, I prepared five playing stones and taught them the stone game. At noon we gathered all the cows—about fifty—and returned together to the village, each shepherd with his cows to his own house.

Before returning home, I used to take my cows to the riverside, gave them to drink and washed them so that they arrived in the village clean and ready to be milked. During the whole week I walked barefoot—in the summer, of course—and only on Sundays I wore shoes and clean clothes and went to church with the family.

At home I used to walk barefoot in the summer, despite my mother's warnings that only Gentiles walked barefoot and that a Jewish child should not do so.

After two weeks of working for the Ukrainian widow, when spending my morning with the cows on pasture, I met a young man with a pair of horses plowing the land that bordered the Ukrainian woman's land. He knew her, of course, and asked me if it was worthwhile for me to work for a poor farmer, who could hardly pay me. Come and work with us, *chlopko* (young man).

"You will work with horses," he said. He knew how to persuade me. "Come, mount my horse." He did not have to repeat this. In no time, I was on horseback. Don't forget that my father had had two horses and that I had known how to gallop them even without a saddle. I immediately regretted what I had done, thinking that maybe I should not have revealed my familiarity with horses. Responding to the man's surprised look, I told him that my father had had a horse and had taught me everything I needed to know on that subject.

The young man accepted my explanation and asked no more questions. He did not ask anything personal, and I told him only my name. I said I was Vladimir Ostinyuk, Vladik for short, and he introduced himself as Peter Karpowicz, newly married with a pregnant wife. He allowed me to ride a certain distance and then

Riding a horse

I came back. He repeated his proposal. His pregnant wife needed him more at home, so he would like to spend more time in the house.

"Come and work with me," he said. "We are rich and you will eat better in our house and we will also pay you more."

"How could I work for you while still with the widow?" I asked.

"That's very simple. Leave her and come to me."

He explained where his house was, but I told him I would not leave the widow without her consent.

"So tell her you want to leave and come to me."

This was actually the end of our conversation. He went back to plow, and after half an hour I returned home with the cows.

7

I worked for the Ukrainian widow almost three weeks. For me it was a long time. Apart from the daughter I knew, she had another daughter, who was newly married without children. That daughter with her husband had been sent by the Germans to work in Germany. They had spent only one year in Germany and had returned to her mother.

I met them and used to talk with them a lot. They asked me various questions, and I repeated the story that I had told to the widow. They treated me well and told me that I was a handsome and industrious boy. In the afternoon, a village boy came to me and asked if I would like to go with him to the forest to pick mushrooms. This region was full of thick forests.

I asked my mistress for permission. She asked me if I could tell edible mushrooms from poisonous ones, and I said that I could. I brought home some eight pounds of nice mushrooms. When alone with her, she asked me, by the way, if I was not Jewish by any chance.

As I was prepared for this possibility, I remained calm and answered in the negative.

"I don't know even what a Jew looks like," I said. "No Jews were in our village, and I wouldn't recognize one."

"I haven't seen Jews in our village either," the woman said, "but I have seen them in the town. They are rich Jews, who dress well and don't like to work. They do business and cheat the Christians."

I asked her if a Jew had ever cheated her, and she said no, but that they had killed Jesus.

"How could Jesus be killed," I answered jokingly. "He is God, so how could anyone kill him?"

She shrugged her shoulders and said she didn't know the answer. "But the Germans don't like the Jews and they kill them. My son-in-law has told me many things I didn't know about them. But you really don't look Jewish."

I said that, if I had a horse and a carriage, I would go to my village, where my grandmother lives, and bring back certificates and testimonies that I am not Jewish.

"Why didn't you tell me that your grandmother is alive?"

"I forgot. Besides, I did not want you to know, as I have run away from an orphanage."

"My son-in-law says that he read in the newspaper that anyone hiding or helping Jews is liable to a very severe punishment, even a death penalty."

"If I had paper, an envelope and a stamp, I would write to my grandmother and ask her to send me documents testifying that I am not Jewish," I said.

She gave me paper, an envelope and money for a stamp, and as if nothing had happened, I went out with the cows in the morning as usual. In the afternoon I went to the post office and bought a stamp. Of course, there was no letter and there was nothing to send. The Pole who ran the post office, identifying me as a Ukrainian, treated me rudely and angrily. "You filthy people!" he shouted at me. "You collaborate with the Nazis. You thought the Germans would establish a state of your own for you!"

Returning home, I told the woman I had sent the letter, but had written as return address the name of Karpowicz.

"Karpowicz? A religious Ukrainian family," the woman responded. "They are also rich. How did you get to them?"

I told her about my encounter with Peter Karpowicz in the field.

She understood and agreed that I go to work for Karpowicz. But she asked that I remain in touch with her. The next time I go to pick mushrooms, she would like me to take Marina with me. "It would be good for the girl to learn how to distinguish good mushrooms from poisonous ones."

The widow agreed to the proposal, particularly because the summer was coming to an end, and in the winter the cows were kept in the cowshed and not taken out, so I would not have much to do.

She apologized for not having the money to pay me right now, but I could come the next week and get what she had promised me. She also gave me as a present a Ukrainian prayer book, one of three that her son-in-law had given her.

"I don't need three," she said with an embarrassed smile, "I can't read even one!"

I left, and after two weeks of working with Karpowicz, I came to her and brought her mushrooms that I had picked in the forest. On that occasion, she gave me the shoes she had promised and had bought for me in the town, as well as straw overshoes that are put on top of the shoes in winter. They looked clumsy, but they warmed the feet very well in the winter. Her married daughter and the husband asked how I felt in the new house. The daughter, who was pregnant, invited me to church to the baptism of the newborn.

In the Karpowicz house I was accommodated in the room of the grandmother, a very old and sick woman, who would leave her bed only when going to the toilet. I helped her very much. I supported her when she went to the outdoor toilet and I brought her food from the kitchen. She treated me as if I were her grandson, and she called me Vladik.

Now, after all these years, I understand that I was actually the only person who paid any attention to her. The family members ignored her, and they seemed to wait for her to die so they could get rid of the burden she was to them.

The mistress herself, Anuska, was about fifty-five years old, energetic, good-hearted, and very religious. She was crazy about

cleanliness and order. After her husband's death, she had become head of the family.

In this village, many of the farmers grew fruit trees. There were large fruit plantations. Apples, pears, plums, cherries, etc. The farmers knew how to use every inch of their land, and between the fruit trees they grew corn, flax, and various fruits of the season.

Near the house they had a large fruit plantation and a plant nursery. Among other things, I also learned to handle a nursery. In short, this woman did not ask too many questions. I told her my usual story, and as she knew that I had worked for the widow, she did not ask any additional questions.

The Karpowicz family was very rich. They had fields, cattle, pigs, horses and fowl, and consequently, there was a lot of work to be done.

The son, Peter, was married but they had no children yet. He looked about twenty-eight years old and his wife, Marina, about twenty. There was also a very young daughter, Marussia, who was about twelve years old. The whole family lived together in a big and spacious house, which had a sloping straw-board roof to enable the snow to slide down so that the roof would not collapse into the house.

The house was made of red soil clay and wood—beams brought from the forest—and the fire hazard was great and terrifying. All men in the village took part in construction work and other jobs requiring much manual work. They would volunteer to help without getting paid.

Every work project ended with a big party and drinking of home-made vodka that was produced from potatoes, wheat, and yeast. This, of course, was illegal because the vodka was a state monopoly, but during the war nobody cared. Different bakery goods and pork delicacies were also served at these parties. There was also a lot of music and dancing in the yard. I would have gladly joined the musicians with my mouth organ, but my father had warned me not to do so because it might raise suspicions. If I wished to go on living with the Gentiles as one of them, I should not make my pre-war education conspicuous.

The party ended late at night, but we, the children, were sent to bed before that because we had to get up early in the morning.

Because I worked for a very rich and respectable family, everybody knew me, including the Ukrainian priest, who used to come to dinner on Sundays. The priest lived in a large Ukrainian village, Kowoloboluky, with his big family. Contrary to the situation with a Catholic priest, a Greek-Orthodox priest is allowed to marry and raise a family. He also owns private land, given to him by the authorities.

After finishing the Sunday prayers in the church in his village, he used to come to our village in his private carriage. Two days before the visit, the mistress killed chickens and baked various kinds of pastry in honor of the important clergyman. When the priest arrived, accompanied by his organist, we received him by kneeling in the yard. Of course, everybody approached him to kiss his hands and to receive his blessing.

All this took place, of course, after returning from the church in our village. I, too, joined the family, dressed in my new clothes and shoes. The priest spread incense around himself and delivered a short sermon, being careful not to touch on any political subject or the Jews. He did not mention the Germans. The priest's sermons usually dealt with help to the poor, the sick, and the oppressed. It was obvious that he was afraid to speak about the occupation. It was well known that in front of their congregations, the priests preached what the authorities had told them to say.

In the past, the priest always used to speak—in fact, to instigate—against the Jews. But now there was no need to incite against the Jews because they had all been killed by the Germans. God had taken revenge on the people who had crucified his son, and there was no need for man to interfere.

All sat down at the table and nobody dared to utter a word. The priest said a few short sentences, blessed the food, and then signaled that the meal could be started. Actually, I

looked forward to the priest's visits on Sundays because on that day plenty of food was served, vegetables, meat, and fruit.

Kneeling before the priest

But this Sunday was exceptional and different from the other Sundays. The priest never spoke to me, but he knew who I was. I was the *nimet* of the family. A *nimet* is a boy from a poor family who has been hired to work for a rich family to support his own family. The boy is usually hired for three of the yearly seasons—spring, summer, and fall. In the spring there is a lot of work. Grain and vegetables are sown. In the summer, the crops are harvested, and the vegetables are collected and prepared for the winter. The main vegetables were potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and beets. During the war, when there was a shortage of sugar, white beets were grown and used for making—after prolonged cooking—a sweet, thick juice that served as a substitute for sugar. In the fall there was also a lot of work to do, like manuring the fields, plowing, and sowing winter grain.

On the whole, I did a lot of hard work. I also treated animals, so I was busy all day. Before starting my work I agreed with them about my pay, and they were quite fair on this matter because they knew—or, at least, thought—that when my parents returned from Germany, they would have to account for everything.

The agreement with the mistress and her son, Peter, was that I shall receive 200 kilos (about 440 pounds) of special grain for baking black bread and white flour for baking white bread. We also agreed that I shall receive two suits, one for weekdays and one for Sundays and holidays, and two pairs of shoes, one with wooden soles and the other one with leather soles. Leather shoes were expensive, but they wanted me to look respectable when going to church with them. We also agreed to about 5 kilos (about 11 pounds) of sugar cubes and 300 kilos (about 660 pounds) of potatoes.

"Fruits of the season are free, you can take as many as you like," they told me.

After making these agreements, I asked them to keep everything and deliver it to my parents when they return from Germany. I could not bring all those things to my grandmother because she was old and alone and the things would be stolen from her.

I would get up to work early in the morning. I plowed with horses in the field, and I also harvested with a scythe or a harvesting knife. Now and then I secretly glanced at Ukrainian newspapers, and I learned that the Germans were retreating from Russia. But a commentary saying that this was a tactical retreat was always together with this news about retreat. From conversations of the adults in the village I understood that the retreat was very real. The Germans were simply fleeing before the Red Army.

I heard many Ukrainians say that it was good that the Germans were being beaten by the Russians. "When the Germans started the war against the Russians," I heard them say, "we helped them because they promised us an independent Ukraine, but it turned out that this was just a promise they had no intention of keeping."

There were clubs of Ukrainians and Russians in the village. On Sundays I used to go there with Marussia, the mistress's daughter. Newspapers and games and also lectures on different subjects were in the club.

A few weeks later, Marussia's mother told us that she thought I should marry her daughter. Of course, she would have to meet my parents first and discuss this with them.

"I want to talk with your parents, particularly as you are from the Russian side of the Ukraine," she said. "That part was under the communist regime. There you were forbidden to believe in Jesus, and maybe you were not even baptized."

Of course, I just shrugged my shoulders and remained silent. Then she went on:

"I will find out from your parents. If there is a doubt of any kind, we will ask our priest to baptize you."

I did not exactly know what baptism meant and I was frightened. Naturally I was afraid to ask about it. Fortunately, she told me herself. "It does not hurt," she said. "They sprinkle holy water on you from a special bowl in the church, and the priest blesses you and your parents who stand beside you."

I told her I would be glad to do it if necessary.

She laughed and said there was plenty of time until then. "Anyway, you are to young to get married," she said. "When your parents are here, then you can become engaged."

She also said her daughter would receive as dowry a piece of land, which the Ukrainians regard as very holy. You never give up land, it is inherited. The more land you own, the richer you are considered to be.

Truly speaking, I don't know if all this talking about a marriage was serious or not. At that time I believed it was. I was even somewhat worried. She was a good and religious woman, but I was convinced that, should it become known that I am a Jew, all her affection and love would evaporate and they would hand me over to the Germans.

My fate would be execution.

I was frequently bothered by thoughts like this, particularly when alone in the field. Only while working in the field I thought of my past, my parents, my sister, and my brother and about what had happened to them. Painful thoughts that I tried to discard from my mind because they caused much pain and grief.

But today, as a grown up man, not as a child as I was at that time, reflecting on this matter, I do not think that they would have delivered me to the Germans. They would probably have told me how risky it was to keep me in their house because of the very severe penalty inflicted by the Germans on anyone doing so. They would have just sent me away, and that would have settled the matter. Meanwhile, they regarded me as a Christian boy, one of them, and even a religious boy. Not only the Gentiles thought this but also the Jews considered me a Christian Ukrainian.

I am referring to an incident when I was alone in the field. While I was watching the cows, two Jews approached me—I identified them immediately as Jews, particularly because of their neglected appearance and despite their speaking Ukrainian. They could not imagine that they were speaking to a Jewish boy. I gave them all the food I had and remained hungry all day long. I did this very fast, as if I wanted to get rid of them

as soon as possible, and indeed they took the food and hurried away.

Meeting Jews in the field

Having to get rid of them so fast and not being able to help them more was painful for me. During the few minutes that they were with me, I did not ask them anything and they did not say anything to me, except to thank me for the food. I had a lot of compassion for them, and I prayed for their survival.

A fourteen-year-old orphan boy worked for a Polish family, who were our neighbors. The boy and I became friends, although I did not particularly like him. He was bad by nature, often becoming involved in fighting and cheating. Even my mistress advised me to keep away from him.

He was an arrogant, impertinent, and obtrusive boy. He was nicknamed Ciclo—or was that his real name? I don't remember his first name and maybe I never knew it. Once he was boasting and telling everybody how he had handed two Jews over to the police, and the Jews had been executed. For his dedication, he had received their clothes. He even showed me those clothes.

"I saw them hiding," he told me proudly, "and then I reported them to the police You would have done the same, wouldn't you?" he asked me.

"I would have been afraid that they might beat me up," I answered, "and anyway I have never seen a Jew and I wouldn't know how to recognize one."

He grimaced and laughed. "When you see a Jew, you identify him immediately. By the smell." He burst into laughter, and what I wanted most of all was to strike him in the face. But two things prevented me from doing this. First, it may have exposed me as a Jew and second, he was one year my senior, and he was much taller and stronger. "When you see a Jew, you must kill him on the spot."

Naturally I avoided him and became more friendly with the son of the Polish family, who was about my age. He spoke fluent Polish, and—although my Polish was as good as his—I intentionally spoke a poor Polish. Knowing Polish was natural for a Ukrainian boy, but not so well and not too fluently. In this region it was also natural that a Polish boy knew Ukrainian . . . .

This Polish boy taught me knitting, and during the winter, when there was less work outdoors, I knitted a sweater—for grandmother.

It was already full winter, and Peter and I began to build a protective layer for the wall of the house. The Ukrainians called this wall a *zahata*. The *zahata* was a 50-centimeter (20-inch) wide straw band that was wound around the house. The straw band was designed to keep the house warm in the winter, when the stove was fired day and night. To prevent the straw band from falling down, we had to reinforce it with wood. This was a strenuous and hard work that took us two full days.

All farmers did this.

When the snow had melted and temperatures rose, the straw band was removed. The straw either served as fodder for the cattle or was spread on the ground in the cowshed for the cows to sleep on. Later some of the same straw served as manure for the fields. Another part of it was used as fuel in the stoves.

Something that I learned about in this Gentile house—which I would never have known in our home—was the pig. The pig is an animal that eats all the time and without distinction. Anything discarded by another animal was considered a choice kind of food by the pig, which is why an eight-month old pig may reach a weight of 100 kilos (220 pounds).

Clearly the Germans considered the pig an important resource. An abundance of meat and fat! Consequently, they used to pay visits to the farmers, attaching an official lead seal to the ear of each pig, and recording it in their books.

The farmers, of course, devised means against the Germans. When the pig became heavy, the farmers would remove the seal very expertly and attach it to the ear of a young pig. Obviously, the authorities confiscated most of the pigs, and only a few were left for the farmer's own use.

The big extra pigs that they managed to hide were slaughtered by the farmers—secretly, of course. During the slaughter, the pigs made a very loud noise that could be heard

from a distance of almost a mile, so this procedure had to be handled in a closed and secret place.

The farmers found a solution to this problem too.

Two people are needed to slaughter a pig! Once I took part in such an operation, which was done quietly and without any problems.

The slaughtering of a pig was carried out like this: You go into the pigsty and close the door tightly to prevent the noise from bursting out. The two enter the compartment where the pig lies, they wind a rope around his neck—Peter did this—and then the other one (myself in this case) hits the pig on the head with the dull side of an ax to make him senseless. After the pig collapsed, I went on strangling him with the rope, while Peter killed him with a 12-inch long knife. This was done at the left leg of the pig, near the heart. When the pig was dead, Peter blocked the hole with his body to stop the blood. We turned the pig over—until now the pig had been lying on its back—and let the blood flow into a bucket.

The next step was to clean the pig's hide, that is, to burn its hair. Then we cut off its head and legs, removed the inner organs of the body and cleaned the intestines, which we filled with meat to produce a sausage. Every such sausage was about twelve inches long and was seasoned with spices and a lot of black pepper and garlic.

Up in the attic, iron shelves were placed in the stove chimney, and the sausage was suspended above them. The smoke passing through the chimney would cook the sausage. Smoked meat was also prepared like this.

Thanks to the cool climate in that region, meat and sausages could be preserved for long periods of time without refrigerators, which did not even exist. The fat of the pig, which formed a layer of up to two inches or more, was shaped into 12-by-4-inch strips, which like the meat, were salted and preserved for long periods of time.

Encouraging rumors came from the war front. People did not listen to the radio. First, listening to the radio was absolutely forbidden, and anyone violating the orders was severely

punished. Second, the villages had no electricity, so radio sets could not be operated. But nevertheless, rumors spread about what was going on, and the last rumor said that the Germans were in full retreat and that the front-line was less than 200 miles away. It was also rumored that anyone touching the ground with his ear might hear the artillery fire.

When I was alone in the field and made sure that nobody saw me, I stretched myself on the ground and tried to hear such sounds, but nothing! I could not hear anything. This, however, did not weaken my feeling that the Germans were retreating and that the Nazi occupation would soon be over.

But the Germans were still there, and the life of a Jew was worthless. I had to be just as careful as I had been all the time.

One day, while I was cleaning the cowshed, I heard a strange voice behind me.

"You, boy, where is your mother?"

I was preoccupied and far away from reality, so this sudden voice gave me a real shock. But my anxiety grew even more when I saw before me a Ukrainian policeman—not just a Ukrainian policeman but the one who had come to our home in the ghetto to inquire about the meat that I had been distributing. I managed to remain calm, hoping he would not recognize me.

"In the house," I answered as I led him to the house.

It turned out that the policeman had come to check the seals of the pigs. I hurried away to the toilet in the yard, watching the house through a hole in the wall. Had I noticed any sign that the policemen had identified me, I would have started to run into the forest to hide.

But everything went all right. The policeman finished his inspection and went away, and I returned to the cowshed to replace the straw. I took two buckets to bring water from the well, which was about a hundred feet away, to give to the cows and the horses to drink. I had to repeat this five times—hard work, but I was already used to it.

Now, something else is worth mentioning. The farmers used to sow two kinds of flax. One is a short, delicate type of

flax and the other a long, rough variety, the seeds of which are crushed into oil that is tasty and as good as olive oil.

Pumping water from the well

The seedless flax was bound into sheaves, eight inches in diameter, and was taken on a carriage to a storage place, which was an empty site where the seeds were separated from the straw. The work was usually manual because in the whole village no more than two combines were available for this kind of work. These machines were leased by the rich farmers, whereas the others had to work manually.

Preparing the flax for its final use required some more treatments, the most important one being soaking it in water for about three weeks. This, in itself, was a very hard job done only by men.

I knew that I had no choice and I would have to do it together with Peter. Because our village did not have a suitable body of water, except for the few small brooks that were sufficient only for the cows and the vegetable gardens, we had to go to a neighboring village, which had a suitable large lake. The farmers brought their flax to this place and paid for the space allotted to them. Each farmer had his own place.

And here my big problem began. Everyone working in the water was completely nude, with no clothes at all. You can just imagine me, trying to conceal my Jewish identity among thirty or forty Gentiles working around me . . . .

The question that bothered me was how I could avoid doing this work. Saying that I was ashamed to be nude? No, that would be foolish! Everyone bathed nude, even the girls who wore only thin, transparent dresses without panties!

True, men and women did not bathe together. There were separate sections for men and women. But these sections were only ten yards from each other. When a man passed the women's section, he used to cover his genitals with his hands. But even if I did this, it would help only for a few minutes. Obviously I could not work with my hands on my genitals.

So what should I do?

Actually, once I had already experienced this kind of thing. I was with a group of boys and girls, aged ten and twelve, in the field, close to a suitable bathing place. The water was deep

enough, over three feet. The girls went into the water and we, the boys, followed them naked but covering our genitals with our hands until we were in the water. Fortunately, all the boys behaved like this, because otherwise I don't know what I would have done. Coming out of the water, I hid my genitals again with my hands. By the way, the girls did not turn aside. On the contrary, they looked at us directly, trying to see something interesting.

When I got back home, I told this story to Peter, and he said the water there was very dirty, so I shouldn't bathe there any more lest I get some disease.

But, the matter of soaking flax in the water, the work that required completely undressing among a crowd of tens of naked men, annoyed me. I was constantly thinking of a way to evade this work. But how?

Finally, after worrying myself day and night, I reached a conclusion. I found a way that was painful and dangerous, but it was the only way, as I saw it at that time.

I wounded myself with a piece of sharp glass!

The pain was terrible, and I am sure I would not repeat that experience today at any price! There was serious bleeding from the wound. I thought that I would lose all my blood, and for a long while I trembled with fear. I picked a few leaves from a nearby tree and put them on the wound. I wrapped the leaves in a big piece of cloth that served for wrapping my food every morning when I went out to the pasture. But this did not help. Soon the cloth was soaked with a large amount of blood.

When I was on my way home, the mistress saw me limping and leaning on a stick. Immediately, without asking any questions, she began to treat my wound. She washed it and instructed me not to walk barefooted to avoid infecting the wound. She also calmed me down and said I should not be alarmed because similar things had happened to Peter as well when he was small. “He too ran around barefooted, and he was often injured by glass or other sharp objects,” she said.

She replaced my primitive dressing with another one that she tore from an old shirt of hers. The new bandage expanded my foot so I could not wear shoes.

The next day she made me wear two thick, home-made pairs of socks, and I went out in the field wounded and limping. I came back riding on the horse of a neighbor. Of course, I was not anxious to get well too soon so, when unseen, I stepped into the dirt to get an infection and to prolong the time of recovery.

As a boy—actually, as a child—I did not think of the possibility that I might cause myself irreversible damage. The infection could have spread throughout the leg! All my thoughts centered on one thing only—to do anything not to reveal my identity. Not to expose myself as a Jew! My main fear was falling into the hands of the Germans. I thought of the more and more frequent rumors that the Germans were being defeated in Russia and that this whole region would soon be liberated from them, and then I would be free! I was the only survivor in our Galician family—I was already convinced that my father was dead. The young Gentiles spoke—with great pleasure—of the fact that no Jew had remained alive, that the last ghetto in the region had been liquidated, and that all Jews had been killed. I also heard adults speak like this, although not with the enthusiasm shown by the children and youngsters. They made the sign of the cross and, in a way, pitied those souls that had not returned to the true faith and had died as unbelievers, but this did not make any difference to me.

My conclusion was that my father was dead and that I must survive to tell how my family was exterminated together with all the Galician Jewry. . . .

8

Two weeks later the time for soaking the flax came. Of course, I did not join. Peter hired a Ukrainian boy to help him. In exchange, Peter promised to lend him his horse and plow for one day so he could plow on his family's land.

But this was not the end of the story. The soaked flax had to remain in the water for three weeks, and then it was taken out by men working naked. This meant that I had to prevent my wound from healing till then!

To remove any suspicion that I had intentionally wounded myself and tried to delay the healing of my wound to evade the work with the flax, I said I would like very much to take part in taking out the flax. But Peter and his mother, Anuska Karpowicz, rejected my offer with a benevolent smile.

"You would not be able to help me at all," Peter said. "It is hard work that requires great strength. You are wounded and not fit for it."

"This work is done every year," Anuska Karpowicz added, "so you will still have time to do it."

In addition, she expressed her concern that the wound and the whole leg might be contaminated, which would necessitate amputating part of the leg to save my life.

"You are going to marry my daughter, and she will certainly not want to marry a cripple. To calm me down, she smiled and added: "But you will get the best treatment so that your wound is healed before the wedding."

She also told me that she had donated to the church candles that were to be lit at the altar, and that she had prayed for my health, so no doubt I was going to recover soon.

"With God's help," she said, "and with my late husband's special ointment"—she made the sign of the cross very devotedly and said some silent prayer—"you will certainly recover."

Then she told me that her husband had been an expert on concocting various ointments, and she sent Peter to bring the ointment against purulent wounds. The ointment that made her so happy was a source of anxiety for me. I believed it might heal my wound. Was all my trouble in vain? I took the ointment from her to apply it to my wound, but I threw it into the toilet!

Now I will explain what happens to the flax after removing it from the water and drying it. The flax sticks turn white after three weeks in the water. By beating them on a special wooden device, the linen fiber is separated from the sticks. The linen from each sheaf is held in the hand and combed with an iron comb, and the result is a pure, long bundle of linen. Some of it is sold to the stores in the town, and the remaining part is used to twine thread that serves for weaving very strong fabrics. They are coarse and strong because they have been made manually rather than being refined on a machine. From a blue, home-woven fabric they sewed me a suit.

I was known in the village as the Karpowicz family's 'Soviet' worker. Of course, I received this nickname because I had come from the part of Ukraine that had belonged to the Soviet Union before 1939.

Fortunately, I knew Russian just as I knew Ukrainian, which helped me to pose as a Soviet boy. A young Russian, about 23 years old, worked in the village. He was a Red Army soldier who had deserted when the Russians retreated from the region. People wanted me to meet him, but I was not happy about it. However, I could not say this, so I met him. In fact, he was equally fearful—or maybe more—of meeting me. After all, he was a deserter from his army and now lived under German occupation!

Making baskets

It turned out that he was not a pure Russian and his Russian was not as good as mine. He was from Kazakhstan. At the beginning of our first encounter there was an atmosphere of uneasiness, but then we both calmed down and had a friendly conversation. We met a few more times. The farmer he worked for was also very rich, but Polish. . . .

When the winter came, there was less work in the field, so I was looking for something to keep myself busy. One day, when riding to the field to inspect the fruit trees, I saw reeds growing near the water springs that were abundant in the area.

I picked a number of reeds and brought them home with me. I had never made wicker baskets and had never seen anyone doing it. In the house I had seen two such baskets, one egg-shaped and the other one round and shallow with two handles.

These two baskets served as a model for me, and I learned to make similar baskets. Following some unsuccessful attempts, I acquired the skill, and soon I became known as an excellent basket maker. People came from everywhere and asked me to make baskets for them.

But before winter arrived, there was Christmas with presents given to children. Many farmers, and especially their wives, came with their children to the municipal building. There, Santa Claus appeared and gave presents to the children. That is, the farmer families had left presents in a certain room, each with the name of the receiver on it, and Santa Claus took them out, called the name of the child and gave him or her the present.

I was very reluctant to go there. Many people would come, and somebody might be from the surroundings and could recognize me. But the mistress insisted on my coming, and because the event was of a religious nature, I could not refuse.

After a few religious ceremonies, the distribution of presents began. Santa Claus was a young man from our village, who wore a purple silk suit and a white beard. Suddenly I was alarmed. The name Vladimir Ostinyuk echoed in the hall! Were they calling me? Yes. If I had any doubt, there was a slight pat

on my back by the mistress to tell me I was not mistaken! Nervous and excited, fearing to be exposed, I walked towards the young man. He—Santa Claus—blessed me and made the sign of the cross and gave me a present.

Impatiently I waited for the event to come to an end, and only when we had come home, I opened the package and found home-made cookies and candy and a new hat. The lady radiated happiness.

"You see?" she said with a broad benevolent smile. "I did not forget you. You are like a son to me."

Her daughter, Marussia, was also there and she too had received a present from Santa Claus. We went home together and it made me feel happy. To conceal my embarrassment, I told her that I had been shy in front of all those people.

I thanked her with tears in my eyes. She and everybody present were convinced that this was my reaction to the affection she had shown me. But, the truth was that at that moment I saw before me my mother, as I had known her then, before the holocaust, during our holidays, the Jewish holidays . .

It was the midst of the winter and very cold, but I was used to the cold. Besides, no cold could affect me, considering the warmth that I felt in my heart, which was due to the persistent rumors about the approaching front-line, the German retreat. One day, when in the field, I attached my ear to the frozen, snow-covered ground, and I could heard the echo of gunfire.

Indeed, my rescue was near. I was forced to conceal the joy that I felt because the Ukrainians did not show any joy or delight toward the coming of the Russians. The Ukrainians had been hoping all the time that the Germans would keep their promise to establish an independent Ukrainian state, not connected to Russia. And now, the Germans were retreating and the Russian army was advancing, and the promised independent Ukrainian state would remain just a promise!

One day the mistress told me to take the horse and ride to the priest's house to work there for two days. I did not like it,

but I had no choice. The farmers used to send workers to the house of the priest, who was very rich, which was not surprising. The work in his house and on his land was done without pay—except for a number of permanent workers—and the personal donations he received were numerous. People thought they were ensuring a place for themselves in paradise by giving to the priest. They gave and he took!

What surprised me was that I had already worked there a few days in the summer, but why in the winter, when there was not much to do?

The priest had a house with 20 rooms, fruit plantations and plenty of land. He also had a wife and children . . . .

The floors in the house were covered with expensive carpets, and icons and precious paintings hung on the walls. There were also golden and gold-plated statues, and all these were, of course, gifts from his religious flock . . . .

I arrived at the priest's house early in the morning and worked indoors with his servants, whom I already knew. For the night's sleep I was given pajamas. They had me sleep in a wide and soft bed with a feather pillow under my head, and such was the blanket with which the maid covered me.

In fact, what surprised me was the fresh air in the room. I felt it immediately because it was totally different from the stench in the small room in the Karpowicz house with the old woman who apparently had not washed herself for a long time.

An unpleasant situation, but I had become used to it in the course of time. Did I have any choice? Nobody cared for the old woman—I was the only one to help her get to the outdoor toilet and to get her back to the bed, which created a friendly relationship and confidence between us.

When I came back after the two days in the priest's house, I returned the horse to the stable and went to the storeroom. There I found out that somebody had been digging in the ground, but soon I had the explanation for this. Thanks to my good relations with the old woman, she provided me with an answer to my question.

"I heard them talk before you went to work for the priest," the woman whispered to me. "It was Peter who said to his mother that you should be sent for two nights to the priest because you might cause a catastrophe."

I might cause a catastrophe?

From the rest of the old woman's story I understood that because the Russians were approaching, it was decided to bury the gold and silver articles kept in the church so the Russian soldiers would not loot them. Because what could prevent a Russian soldier from exchanging a golden chalice or tray, a golden cross or icons of Jesus, or any other thing, for a few bottles of vodka?

I must point out that all the time the old woman did not stop making the sign of the cross.

"Surely," the woman hastened to say, "neither of them, Anuska or Peter, suspects you of informing the Russians. But, as Peter said and Anuska agreed with him, since you are 'Soviet' and speak Russian very well, you might, even unintentionally, of course, give the Russian soldiers a hint about where the church treasures are hidden."

It was difficult for me to accept this story, but it appeared justified to me, so I remained silent. To be able to bury the church treasures in the ground, they had sent me to sleep in the priest's house. In fact, I was not angry with the mistress and her son, particularly as this only proved that the Germans were retreating rapidly from Russia and that soon, possibly within a few days, the Red Army might liberate the region and I would be free!

I would not have to be afraid of the Nazis any more! The only one in my whole family!

I knew that after the liberation I would not be able to go on living here, in this village. Because then people would ask why I don't receive letters from my parents and why they don't come back from Germany. Suddenly people would be interested in me! True, I would not have to fear anymore of being identified as a Jew and handed over to the authorities. This fear would pass away after the liberation, but still. . . !

From time to time I used to pay a visit to my first mistress, the poor widow. Whenever I went there, I was bothered by the thought that she once had said her son-in-law suspected I was a Jewish boy passing myself off for a Gentile. Surely, she did not mention this since, but still I wanted to know what she was thinking now. But, today, as I judge my behavior in those days, it seems to me that I was wrong to visit her frequently. Though I always came to her with fresh mushrooms I had picked in the forest, I now think I should not have done it. It may have seemed like a bribe. As if I had meant to say that whatever you think about me, I see you as friends, I don't harm you and you are not responsible for me, so you need not fear me even if the worst—exposure of my true identity—should happen. You haven't been employing me for some time and you never knew I was Jewish. Nobody will charge you with anything with regard to the relationship we had.

Lately during my visits I also wished to test her daughter, Marina, who was my age, and to find out what she had been told about me, if at all. I asked her once, indirectly, what she thought of my leaving them and moving to the house of the Karpowicz family, and she answered that her mother had justified this because she was a poor woman, without fields and horses, who could not employ a hired boy.

"Mother agreed to release you," Marina explained, "so that the neighbors, especially the women, would stop annoying her with their gossip."

Of course, I was glad to hear this. I learned from Marina that she still went to school because her elder sister, who had returned from work in Germany, took care of the cows. This sister lived in a separate house, but she had a cow herself, so it was not difficult for her to take their cows as well to the pasture.

She showed me what subjects she was studying at school, like geography, history, math, etc., subjects I had mastered when I went to school, but I made the impression that I did not understand anything of this. I studied during the Russian occupation, when the standards were much higher than they were now.

She even suggested that, whenever I had the time, I could come and she would teach me.

I asked if her mother would not object to her wasting her time with me, and then, in my presence, she asked her mother the same question. Her mother said yes and added:

"If you know more than he, I don't see any reason why you should not help him. Even Jesus"—she turned her head towards the icons of Jesus in the room—"said that you should help an orphan."

These words hurt me. "I am not an orphan!" I cried out. "I have a father and a mother!"

"That is right," she agreed with me, "but right now they are not with you, and who knows how they are and whether they will return and if so, when."

During the Polish rule, before the Russian occupation, education was compulsory and parents had to pay a fine if their child did not go to school. But now, under the German occupation, nobody cared if the children went to school or not.

In Karpowicz family home lived a girl my age, who studied the whole week in a school in the town and came home only for the weekend. I once told her that I was visiting the widow's house and that Marina was teaching me what she learns at school. The girl burst into laughter. She wondered how the girl could teach me what she didn't know herself! The standard of teaching in the village school was very low.

She asked me if I knew who Petlyura was. As I answered in the negative, she said very seriously that Petlyura was a great Ukrainian hero and every Ukrainian should know about him and his activities. Immediately after World War I, he had established a Ukrainian army and had fought for our independence.

"He killed many Jews!" she concluded proudly.

This gave me a bad feeling. "And what happened to him in the end?" I overcame my feelings and asked.

"Some young Jew recognized him in Paris and shot him dead," she answered with open pain and grief.

At that moment I felt my heart was full of joy. A Jewish man killed the enemy who had led his men to kill Jews....

She told me to learn this name by heart and always to remember it! I promised her to do so.

Lately the Germans were visiting the houses of the villagers quite frequently, and this made me very anxious. I tried to keep myself busy not to see them. I despised them, but I always feared them, though I knew that liberation was close. They used to come together with Ukrainian policemen to collect taxes. Taxes were not paid in money but rather in food products.

When the taxes ("*Kontingent*" in the German vocabulary) were to be collected, Ukrainian clerks, accompanied by German soldiers, appeared and temporarily confiscated the horse carriages, loaded them with grain sacks, and then took them directly to the railway station in the town. The carriages with the grain were protected by German soldiers against the Ukrainian underground fighters of Bandera and against partisans who would appear suddenly from the forests, "confiscate" the grain and escape swiftly to the place they had come from.

With the last confiscation of grain, Peter traveled as a porter, but also because he wanted to take back the sacks that were made from linen and could be reused. That is, after pouring the grain into the railway carriage, you had to "grease the palm" of the man in charge with something, e.g., a few silver coins, and then he would return the sacks to you. The confiscated grain was transported to my town, Trembowla, about twelve miles from the village where I worked, and from there the grain was carried further on by train. On returning, Peter brought new harnesses for the horses. Of course, they were not made of leather because leather was very scarce, but from the ropes that Jews ("*Shtrikdreiers*") used to make before the occupation.

I should mention an event I once witnessed, when two Germans suddenly entered the Karpowicz house. This, of course, frightened me very much. What did they want? What brought them there? Did they come to take me away now, when liberation was so close, when the Nazi army was retreating in panic?

Indeed, it turned out that the hasty retreat was the reason for their coming! However, this did not involve me. They had

simply been separated from their unit and they came to ask for some food! But I, a child who had experienced so much hardship, was alarmed at the sight of their green uniforms. I understood everything they said in German, my heart rejoiced hearing them beg for some food, but I remained indifferent and did not show that I understood German. We gave them fruit, which we had plenty of, and they left.

When they were gone, I understood that the end of the arrogant Germans was nearing! No more conceit and haughtiness—they now looked like beggars asking for a piece of dry bread!

9

From time to time I met the boy from Kazakhstan who had deserted from the Red Army and was now working for a Polish farmer in the village.

"It is only a matter of time," he said with an expression of sadness in his eyes, "before the Red Army is here. It may take another ten days or two weeks."

What an alternation of fortune! What was happiness and salvation to me was a source of sadness and a calamity to him.

He reminded me of an agreement we had reached long ago. It was an agreement I seldom thought of at that time and, in fact, had forgotten altogether.

"Do you know what awaits me as a deserter from the Red Army?" he asked. As I did not answer, he went on. "Without any trial, they will place me against the wall and fire lots of bullets at me. They will also do the same to your father. He is at the conscription age and should have escaped with his family to Russia and joined the army!"

In the beginning I did not understand why he was threatening me, but very soon I understood him well. He needed my help.

"Both of us are in trouble," he continued. "But you are a child, so they won't do anything to you, though you should be worried about the fate of your parents. So, you must help me!"

He went on telling me that he intended to run away from there within a week. He was convinced that the villagers would inform against him that he was a deserter. They would not do it

on purpose, but just as a slip of the tongue, boasting before the Russians that they had a soldier from the Red Army in the village, who had stayed there after the Russian retreat, and they would suggest that they meet him, and then . . . "That would be my end!" he finished his words with tears in his eyes.

"They will execute me without a trial! The commander will read me the sentence prescribed in the law, and they will fire bullets through my heart!"

I asked how I could help him, and he answered me that upon the arrival of the Russians, he would escape into the forest. He went with me to the place where he had planned to hide. All he wanted me to do was to bring him food. Then he added that he would tell me before deciding to run away.

So we agreed and parted.

• • •

The village where I was working was surrounded on all sides by thick forests. One of the neighboring villages was called Papirania. That village was also surrounded by forests, and only one sand road connected it with other villages. One month before our region was liberated by the Red Army, the Russians parachuted Russian partisans into the vicinity of Papirania; even heavy arms—machine-guns and mortars—were dropped by parachutes. The partisans would enter the villages from time to time, confiscating the food and cattle that the Ukrainians were forced to provide.

The truth was that the Ukrainians were not glad at all to have the Russians back. This was despite fact that the Germans had not kept their promises, that is, granting the Ukrainians independence and all the rest. Having experienced two years of Russian occupation in the past, the Ukrainians knew what the communist rule was like and anticipated its return with great anxiety. First, the Russians would confiscate the lands and the entire property of the Ukrainians.

"They will let us keep only the dog and the cat," Anuska Karpowicz said. "Also the vegetable garden at the house and a few chickens."

I was truly sorry about what would happen to the woman—and, in fact, to her whole family—who had kept me in the house and regarded me almost as a son. But, this was destiny! All the time the Germans were there, I had feared for my life, and now the wheel had turned and they lived in fear.

What would have happened if my identity had been exposed? Would the Karpowicz family have continued to relate to me as before?

I have not yet forgotten the joy expressed by their daughter when she was telling me about Petlyura, the adored Ukrainian hero, who had led his men to kill Jews!

Nevertheless, it was clear that this time the Russians would make their yoke heavier on the Ukrainians because the Russians regarded them as traitors! The Ukrainians had believed the Germans and had considered them as rescuers....

Naturally I showed sympathy toward my mistress and promised her my support. "I will only go to my grandmother's village," I said. "It's a matter of a few days, and I will find out about my parents."

It was my intention to escape to my village and not to return any more, but this decision I kept secret and did not reveal it to her.

• • •

One day the boy from Kazakhstan came to tell me that he would leave the following day.

"The Red Army is about twelve miles from here now, so they will be in the village today or tomorrow."

He also told me that he would go to the forest early in the morning. He would take food for three days and would wait for the front to move away. Then he would move on to find work in one of the villages where nobody knew him.

The next day there was a lot of tumult and confusion in the village. In fact, this was as I had always imagined the coming of the Messiah because in my eyes this really was like the arrival of the Messiah. Only it was a pity that it was not our Messiah who would bring resurrection . . . .

The air was full of explosions, rifle and machine-gun fire and, particularly, a noise that sounded to me like a celestial orchestra—the roaring of the Russian tank engines! The line of Red Army tanks passed us in pursuit of the panic-stricken, retreating Germans, and only one tank stopped. Apparently a failure of some kind.

We, the children, were curious and gathered around the tank. It stayed there for about half an hour until the crew managed to repair it, and then it joined the line. While we were still standing there, observing the Russians, one of them threw a handful of coins, and we all jumped to collect the money. These were Russian coins, copecks. My share was five coins. After the tank had gone, somebody spread a rumor that a column of German horse carriages was parked not far from there.

I ran there with all the other children, and what we saw was a real joyful scene. Some hundred horse carriages stood there, and around them we saw a large number of dead German bodies. Whoever had not been killed among the coachmen and the military guards had run away. Presumably the line of Russian tanks had reached them and annihilated them. The Russians did not even stop there. They did their job and continued their march, and now I saw men and women from the neighboring villages looting everything that could be taken home to the village. I hurried back to the Karpowicz house, took a wheel barrow and two sacks, and returned as soon as I could to the carriage lot. I could bring more things with the wheelbarrow. Two Belgian horses were harnessed to each carriage—large, wide animals. One could say that every Belgian horse is a living tank on four feet. From one of the carriages the people packed weapons and ammunition into their sacks, that is, rifles and bullets. For what purpose did they need so many weapons and so much ammunition?

But I did not stay there to reflect on this matter. What business of mine was this after all? I ascended one of the carriages and started to fill my sacks and wheelbarrow with canned food of all kinds and soap, toothpaste and various things that I had already forgotten existed.

I was satisfied with what I could load on the wheelbarrow and took everything home. Many did the same, while some farmers simply mounted a carriage and drove it home with all its contents. There was a carriage loaded with tools. I took a few items that might be helpful on the farm. I also wanted to take a rifle with bullets, but a farmer drove me away from there. Children should not touch weapons. It's dangerous!

Unfortunately, I had to give up the rifle, but the box with the bullets remained in my pocket. There were ten bullets. Soon only a few carriages were left. The others had been taken by the farmers. The remaining carriages were empty, and the horses had been released and were free to graze on the grass.

I came home with the wheelbarrow and we began to examine what I had brought. It turned out that Peter had been home all the time. He did not come to the place where the carriages were because, being a Ukrainian, he was afraid of meeting the Russians, considering the tense situation that prevailed between the Russians and the Ukrainians. Those who looted the German carriages were mostly Poles. The spoil I had brought included mainly new tools, such as pliers, hammers, files, nails for horse-shoes, tongs, and so forth.

I also brought a large quantity of canned meat, chocolate, coffee, cocoa, and tea. In addition, I brought various tubes whose contents were unknown to me. I decided to return once more to the place, which was not far, but nothing was left there. Only the horses went on grazing on the grass. As I was very tired, I took a horse and rode back home.

When Peter saw the horse, he laughed and told me to leave him in the field. "We don't need such a big horse," he said. "He does not fit our carriages and besides he eats a lot." Well, I mounted one of our horses and towed the Belgian horse by a rope, bringing him back to the field where I released him.

The Russian tanks had passed and we had two very quiet days, without seeing even a sign of a Russian soldier. Now I had the opportunity to go and meet the Kazakhstan deserter at his hiding place in the forest.

He was glad to see me. He had heard the shooting from far away and was worried. I related what had happened and told him that no Russian soldier had been seen for the last two days. He was happy with the food I brought him, especially the canned food, which was American. After sitting and chatting for a while, we parted, and I promised to come and inform him of any change in the situation in the village. Before that he warned me not to speak Russian to the Russian soldiers.

"They might enroll you in the army," he warned me.

I understood he was serious about this. "In the army I will be able to fight the Germans," I argued.

Until two weeks ago I would not have dared to speak like this. The sight of the panic-stricken retreating Germans and the killed Germans lying in the field near their carriages and, in particular, the sight of the Russian tanks and soldiers had given me the courage to talk like this.

"In the army, when fighting against the Germans," the deserter said, "you might be injured and killed. What's the use of it? The Red Army soldiers will defeat the Germans without your help."

As our approaches were different, and because he did not know I was a Jew and eager to fight and kill Germans with my own hands, I 'agreed' by nodding my head and left him.

10

A company of Russian soldiers was stationed in the yard of the Karpowicz family. They cooked various kinds of cereal in big aluminum dishes on an outdoor fire they had made, but this was not enough for them, and they went from house to house asking for food.

They got potatoes and cooked them. Their supply of canned American meat was scarce. They spent about one week in our garden, and I became friendly with them because I spoke Russian. They wondered where I had learned such good Russian, and I told them that we had studied Russian at school and that I learned languages easily.

The whole village became filled with Russian soldiers, and their officers made sure they behaved themselves and conformed with military discipline and order. "This is not an occupied enemy country," the commanders explained, "this is 'our' own country, liberated from the Fascist conqueror, and you should treat the civilians as Soviet citizens."

And this was not just talk. They also proved this in practice. For example, there was a case where Red Army soldiers from an Uzbekhistan unit stole chickens, wrung their necks, and then fried the chickens. When the commander heard of this, the soldiers were sentenced in a disciplinary trial to hard labor in a penal company. The commander summoned the farmers, explained to them what had been done and said:

"The Red Army command will not tolerate such practices. After eating canned food on the front for many months, the soldiers wanted to eat fresh chicken, which is understandable, but stealing is forbidden! The farmers understand this and of their own free will, they will provide the army with chickens as a contribution to the military morale."

The farmers "understood" what the Russian commander meant, and a large number of chickens were 'donated' to the army stores.

"The Russians don't rob like the Germans," said Peter, who was also among the 'donors', "they make us donate of our own free will!"

"I hope it will remain like this," Anuska Karpowicz said, raising her eyes to heaven, "and that they won't rob us in the name of the law!"

This fear of the communist rule prevailed among all farmers. They had not yet forgotten the period of Russian occupation in the years 1939–1941, when the communists had confiscated everything, leaving the farmers with almost nothing.

I wanted to ask the Russians in our yard why they were staying here rather than going to the front-line and beating the Germans, but they were not willing to discuss this matter.

Two weeks later the soldiers left the village. The military traffic on the road was heavy. Vehicles carrying equipment and soldiers hurried to the front-line, to the Polish border, while vehicles carrying weapons that needed repair, ambulances with wounded soldiers, and trucks with prisoners of war traveled in the opposite direction.

The German prisoners in the trucks were probably wounded or senior officers because thousands of other POW's were moved on foot. Oh, how I happy I was to see the Germans, the 'master race', walking with torn clothes, dirty, and with their backs bent. The exact opposite of what they had looked like just a few months earlier. The Ukrainians, standing on the roadside and seeing the sights, had different thoughts. Although the Germans did not grant them independence, as they had promised, the Ukrainians still preferred them to the Russians,

but they kept this to themselves and did not express any opinion openly. They knew very well that the army, whose only task was to fight and beat the Germans and not to deal with the civilians, would be followed by the 'establishment', the Soviet secret police, who would settle accounts with the Ukrainians who had betrayed them on the front and had welcomed the Fascist occupation forces. . . .

The next day, or two days later, while I was in the field, I was taken, together with a few dozen boys and adults, to the nearby forest. No, I was not frightened because the friendly and smiling Russian soldiers told us that we were going to help them with cutting trees, sawing them into logs ten feet long, and loading them onto trucks.

The Russians had no suitable tools, except for handsaws and axes. But they did not press us and did not threaten us with insults, dogs, or gun shots in the air, as the Germans had done. They themselves worked and asked us to help them. They even shared their food with us.

As I have already indicated, these were Red Army soldiers and not forces of the Soviet establishment, and it was easy to get along with them. In fact, they were young men, either Russian or belonging to other nations of the Soviet Union, who only wanted to finish the war and return home as soon as possible.

It was the beginning of spring, a very rainy season in our region, and the highway, a road that had not been maintained for many years, looked more like a sand road. The heavy military traffic formed many pits, which were filled with rainwater and had turned into pools of water and mud.

We had to fill these pits and cover them with the logs that we had cut in the forest. I did this work willingly and gladly, unlike the Ukrainians, who were against anything that might help the Red Army in its pursuit of the Fascists. I felt I was contributing to the war effort against the Germans.

Coming home in the evening, I met an angry Peter—since the German retreat and the arrival of the Russians, Peter

had changed completely and he was ill-humored and angry all the time—they had been worried about me.

"Where have you hidden all day?" he asked angrily. "You have been with the Russian soldiers and neglected your work!"

"We were worried about you, Vladik," his mother, Anuska, said, giving her son an angry look in an attempt to calm him down.

I told them what had happened. They understood and relaxed. There is nothing you can do against the army!

The next day Peter told me to stay at home and help him to take apart the *zahata*, the protective strips of straw that we had wound around the house before winter came. The work was hard and unpleasant and took two days. During the winter the straw had absorbed a lot of moisture and frost, and now it smelled of rot. In addition, lots of mice had got into it, to the merriment of the village cats, who gathered at the prospect of having a good meal. I was armed with a heavy club to hit the mice that I came across.

This is what I did at the time, something that would disgust me today. The straw could not serve as animal fodder, so we used it to replace the dirty straw in the cowsheds.

Three weeks had already passed since the Red Army had liberated our zone. From the rumors that reached me and from reading the newspapers, I learned that a great part of Poland had already been liberated and that the Red Army was now advancing towards Berlin.

In a Russian paper I even saw a huge headline reading: Forward to Berlin! I began to think about the possibility of returning to my village. It would not be difficult to reach the village, which was about fifteen miles away. There I could find out who—if anyone—of the villagers had survived. But the disturbing thought that I might be the only survivor in my village, or even in the whole of Poland, stopped me from going there. What would I do all alone? With no family, with no relatives?

Nevertheless, I was bothered by the thought that somehow a few others may have survived as well. It was my curiosity that spurred me to return to my village. After all, some time ago I had met two Jews in the field. Maybe they had managed to hide in the forest together with other Jews until the Russians came.

However, it was not easy to leave the Karpowicz family without a word. They would worry about me! One thing was clear—I must not reveal to them my identity now. The truth might harm our relations—my relations with Anuska, who had destined me to become her daughter's husband, and my relations with Peter, who never said anything against Jews, but I had concluded that he did not particularly like Jews, although his feelings in this respect were far from those of the Germans. He did not like Jews, but would not be happy to kill them!

So what should I do? How should I act?

Day after day I went on thinking about how to act. There was more and more work to be done in the plantations and the field.

"True, the war is not yet over," Peter told me one day, "but a lot of work has to be done."

We went together to plow, to whitewash the trunks of the trees against harmful insects, and to treat the beehives that were located in a distant corner of the fruit plantation. In the evening, I returned home totally exhausted, and after supper I went to bed early in the narrow room I shared with the old grandmother.

Lying in my bed, I kept planning how to get away from there after notifying the Karpowicz family and getting their consent. I would say that I was leaving for a few days, just to visit my grandmother and to find out about my parents.

One night, when our village and its surroundings swarmed with Russian soldiers, and Peter closed himself in the house to avoid being taken to army work, and even I remained at home, I decided the time had come. Tomorrow morning I would mount a horse and ride home. . . . At the last minute I decided

not reveal my intention. I would go away and they would think that the Russians had taken me to work for them again.

I got up at four in the morning. I knew the hour because the wall clock used to ring on the hour, and the cocks in the hen-houses used to start crowing. To avoid suspicion that I had left the house, I did not take anything with me. Only fruit, canned apples from last year, and I was on my way. A 14-year-old boy, who had not yet grown up but had lost his mother, his father, his brother, and his little sister. In fact, I had no knowledge of my father's fate, but I knew that the whole ghetto where my father had stayed had been annihilated and nobody had survived.

True, from time to time I tried to think that my father might have escaped into the forest and joined the other Jews there, but I did not really believe it. To do so, one needed a strong will, a tremendous yearning for life, but my father was a broken man. The death of mother, Moshe, and Zipporah had deprived him of any will to live. . . .

Had I been beside him, I would have encouraged him to escape with me to the forest and fight the Nazis together with the Jewish partisans. . . .

I knew the way to my village, Trembowla. I walked on the road and hoped some military vehicle would give me a hitch-hike, but nobody stopped. I managed to mount a farmer's carriage and traveled about two miles. Then I saw Belgian horses in the field, some of those that the Germans had used and were now free.

I left the carriage, approached one of the horses, mounted it and began to ride slowly. One could not ride fast with the big and heavy Belgian horse. With reins I might have managed to speed up the horse a little more. In the beginning I was still full of anxiety. I was afraid that a Gentile would appear, throw me off the horse, possibly beat me, and then take the horse away from me. But soon I calmed down and began to behave naturally. There was nothing to fear. The Germans had been chased away. I was free! Free! I had won the greatest prize, my life!!!

On my way I passed farmers on horse carriages, and from the opposite direction military vehicles were coming, many of which were spoil taken from the Germans. Only the sign of the swastika had been erased, and instead the red star appeared. I also saw Russian soldiers on bicycles. These, too, were German spoil.

Nobody stopped me and nobody asked me where I came from or where I was going.

Burned or demolished German vehicles were spread on both sides of the road. My heart rejoiced at the sight of the swastikas that seemed to stretch their arms upwards in surrender. The Nazi symbol had been humiliated and degraded.

In one of the small villages on the way I met a Russian soldier riding a lean and weak horse.

"Whereto?" the soldier asked me in Russian, apparently hoping I would understand him.

"To Trembowla," I answered.

"Trembowla?" the Russian repeated the name which seemed to him strange. "Where the hell is it?" he asked. He drew out a map from his bag, studied it and found the place of my home village.

He even told me how many miles I still had to go. Suddenly he became aware of the fact that I spoke good Russian and he asked me why.

I explained to him that I was a Ukrainian and that the languages were similar.

It turned out that he believed my explanation, but he was more interested in my horse than in my knowledge of Russian.

"Get down from the horse!" he ordered suddenly. I hesitated, of course, and he went on: "Get down or I'll take you down!"

But the change in his attitude made him laugh. He took a handful of Russian coins out of his pocket and said: "Take the money for the horse! And I'll give you my horse, too!"

I rejected the money and the exchange of horses. "Your horse is lean, and I'll just wear out my bottom and thighs riding it," I said. "The sack you are sitting on won't be of much help."

Apparently he was a Russian from some mountainous territory. I had heard that these people were able to ride without a saddle, and he was good at that. He descended from his horse, and so did I. He embraced me as a sign of affection like only Russians were capable of doing.

"Stay here with both horses," he said. "I'll be back soon! I'll just find something to put on the horse!"

Soon I saw him come out of a farmhouse, holding a feather cushion and followed by a Polish woman who was yelling and cursing in Polish! He did not understand a word of what she was shouting, and on reaching me he asked if I had understood anything.

"She cursed you for robbing the cushion," I answered.

"Nonsense!" he said, ignoring the woman's cries. "We soldiers, are used to this! Actually, we deserve everything! We came here to liberate them from the German oppression, and what do we ask for? A soft cushion to sit on. We sacrifice our lives, so we deserve something to put under our bottoms!" He burst into loud laughter, and I couldn't restrain myself and joined him. He put the cushion into a sack, placed it on the back of his horse and tied it with a rope, while another rope was wound around the horse's neck and served as some kind of reins.

I didn't argue with him. I mounted his horse and cast a look at the house of the Polish woman. She was still standing at the door and shouting, but did not dare to come closer. After all, a Russian soldier armed with a rifle. . . .

"I'll accompany you a little," he said. "The Polish woman may want to chase you."

We rode side by side. He told me that he was in no hurry because his unit was expected to arrive three days later, and he was waiting for it. He also told me that he had recently been discharged from a hospital, where he had recovered from a wound. He had been a section commander and had been wounded in his leg by a bullet. After his discharge from the hospital, walking was difficult for him, so he entered the stable of some farmer and took a horse. According to army regulations,

soldiers were not allowed to confiscate anything from the inhabitants, but he was ready to stand trial rather than walk.

"It's war, and the officers don't have the time to deal with petty offenses," he smiled. "Besides, only the soldiers know about such a regulation, and it's not probable that this poor farmer would dare submit a complaint to the army."

After some time, when we had reached a reasonable distance from the Polish village, we parted and I started a slight gallop, taking care not to ride on the road margins because vehicle traffic was steadily increasing.

I went on riding along the roadside, ready to turn aside and hide among trees or within thick vegetation if necessary. At noon—I knew the time from the position of the sun—I tied the horse's forelegs with a short rope to allow him to feed on the grass but not to run away. I washed my face in a brook with water that was streaming from a well. The water was clear and had a pleasant taste. I ate my last apple that I had kept in a piece of cloth, which I then used to wipe my face and head.

I rested for about half an hour, mounted my horse, and then resumed my journey. I was in an excellent mood. In fact, for a long time, many months, I had not felt like this! I was free, I was a human being like anyone else! No more German Nazis were threatening my life! I hoped that I would meet, tomorrow or the next day, or maybe within a few hours, more Jews who had survived hell.

I was so happy that I could not restrain myself and I burst into a loud cry:

"I am a Jew! A **J-E-W**!"

I immediately became silent and looked around me to see if I had been heard by someone. A few weeks ago, actually only a few days ago, I would not have dared to think of that word! I used to wake up frightened and perspiring if I only had dreamt that I was a Jew. "I am a Jew! A Jew!" I cried out again overwhelmed with happiness.

Towards the evening I arrived at the outskirts of my village. To whom and where should I go?

To Malik, the Polish farmer, of course. This good and benevolent Gentile, in whose field I had hidden when leaving Trembowla and where I had waited for my father who did not come. When I reached Malik's house, I knocked at the door, and his wife opened the door.

She reacted as if she had seen a ghost. She gaped and her lips moved, but she was unable to breathe a word. She only made the sign of the cross a few times on her chest and between us, and then, finally, she made a great effort and managed to say:

"Is this you? Are you alive?"

"Yes" I answered, "it is I and as you can see, I am living."

"Who is it there?" Malik called, hurrying from the other room. He, too, was surprised to see me alive, but regained control immediately and with a broad smile on his face, he hastened to embrace me. "You are alive! Thank God! I am so happy to see you." He took a step back and examined me with his look. "And you look fine. You have had enough food!"

"Get away from the door," the woman said anxiously, pulling me inside and hastening to close the door.

"You silly woman," Malik said jestingly, "there is nothing to be afraid of any more. The damned Nazis have escaped and the Russians are advancing towards Berlin, as I heard on the radio."

They had a ten-year old son. He recognized me immediately and clasped me.

But the woman was not yet at ease. As a simple woman, she did not exactly understand the situation on the front, and casting frightened looks at the window, she said to her husband:

"Have you forgotten? Don't you remember what happened in Buczacz?"

Buczacz was the town where the writer S.Y. Agnon was born. He wrote much about the town. At that time, of course, I didn't know this and hadn't heard of the great writer.

From my look Malik understood that I did not know about the Buczacz case, so he explained it to me:

"After the Russians had succeeded in driving away the Nazis from Buczacz and had liberated the town, the few Jews who had survived, a few tens out of several thousand, hastened to come out from their hiding places. It turned out that it was too early, but who could blame them. First of all, nobody knew that the Germans would launch a counter-attack and would recapture the town and, second, everyone was so anxious to find out about other survivors in his family or among his friends. But, as I already said, the Nazis reoccupied the town, and the Ukrainians, people without God in their hearts, were glad at their return and hastened to inform against those surviving Jews. The Germans, of course, rushed to the place and brutally killed the poor survivors."

"But now," he said with a feeling of victory, "this cannot happen again. The Germans are about to be expelled from the whole of Poland, and even if they launched a counter-attack here and there and might manage to occupy some places near the German border, this is very, very far from us."

Then I told them where I had been and how I had survived. I asked if there was any chance that my father would be alive, but Malik replied that he did not believe it. It was over a month since the Germans had retreated from there, and had my father survived, he would no doubt have come to Malik, as I had done.

I said to them that I would like to go into the town to see who had survived and to visit those who had helped me during the ghetto period and had even risked their lives for me, as, for instance, Mrs. Haricziszin, for whom I occasionally had worked. She had helped me with food.

"But I gather that all Jews have run away from this area to the Russian border in fear of surprises at the front-line," I said, "so it might be too early. The surviving Jews have probably not yet returned to Trembowla."

Malik suggested that meanwhile I should return to the village where I had worked and wait there a month before coming back to them.

"You will always find an open house here," he said, his wife nodding in approval. "I was always a friend of your family and always will be." He also suggested that I leave immediately, that same night, because the Karpowicz family was no doubt very worried about me. "Your horse has rested and has had something to eat and drink, so now you can easily ride back to Malinisky," he said.

In addition to all the food I had been served, they also gave me provisions for the journey. We parted and I went to my horse.

"You should ride on the side of the road," his wife advised me. "I understand from your story that the road is full of Russian soldiers and they might take you in their army!"

"I think that would be wonderful!" I enthusiastically exclaimed. "I would have the opportunity to fight the Germans and take vengeance for my family!"

"You are fourteen, my child," Malik said, "and the Russians don't conscript men below eighteen. They don't need children!

And an other thing," he added on a more serious note, "you are the only survivor in your family, so you must be careful and stay alive to reestablish your family."

These words were very convincing. We parted warmly, I mounted my horse and began my journey back to my village, to the Karpowicz family.

11

I gave Malik the cushion, which the Russian soldier had confiscated from the Polish family. I filled the sack with straw and rode away, arriving in my village only early the next morning. I had been forced to ride on the shoulder of the road because of the heavy military traffic throughout the night. Civilian traffic was sparse. Here and there I saw large quantities of artillery shells, which had been abandoned by the fleeing Germans or prepared by the Russians in case they might have to beat off a German counter-attack. I don't know which is true, and it is not important now.

As I approached the village, I left the horse in the field, free to go wherever he liked, and I continued on foot. I didn't worry about the horse. He could feed on the grass in the field, plenty of water was available, and perhaps some farmer might take the horse to his farm.

The Karpowicz family was happy to see me again. They had, indeed, worried about me. I told them that the Russians had taken me to work for them again, and that I was so tired after my release that I fell asleep and woke up only early in the morning.

I lied resolutely and confidently. At that time I was able to lie very convincingly. After all, lies had saved my life! Had I not lied about being a Ukrainian Christian boy and had I not behaved accordingly, I probably would not have survived! I

stayed with the Karpowicz family for another month, and life reverted to its old routine.

I did all the work in the house that had been assigned to me. I helped Peter with the work in the field, like plowing, sowing, and so on. When I was working with Peter, I felt that he was very sad, that his mood had changed. I didn't inquire about the reason for this, but one day he opened his heart and told me:

"I am tilling the land now, but as soon as the Russians are through with the war, and this may happen any day now, they will come here and confiscate all our cattle, horses, pigs, and fowl, and the whole village will be turned into one collective farm, a *kolkhoz*." He seemed to know better than I did about the situation on the front and that the Russian victory over the Germans was certain.

He went on telling me that all the military vehicles, the war equipment, the food, and all the rest seen on the road had been sent to the Russians from America, who had joined the war and was helping the Russians with everything.

"Were it not for the Americans," he concluded with a genuine sigh, "the Russians could not have stood firm against the Germans and would have been defeated!"

Without showing anything on my face, I said to myself: "God bless America!"

"A *kolkhoz* is a collective farm," he went on with bitterness, "where all the farmers work together to till the land of the entire village. No more private farms! The Russian government takes all the produce and gives the farmer only what he needs for his subsistence, for his daily needs. The farmer, although cultivating his own land and his own farm, is actually working for the Russian government. It is not a private thing any more, something that belongs to him!"

The truth is that, even though I had considered myself a member of the Karpowicz family while I was working there and felt that I had a share in the farm, I had not given any thought to what might happen to them after the war, when the Russians would regain command of the country. After all, how could one

compare their catastrophe with the tragedy that happened to my people, the Jews? The Karpowicz family would stay alive, each one in his own house, free to work and to manage their lives, whereas my people, the Jews, had been deprived of life!

I understood that Peter, although he did not say so explicitly, hated the Jews and considered them guilty of what had happened to them, the Ukrainians.

After reaching this conclusion, I decided that time had come to leave them for good! I collected every fragment of information that came to me about the front-line, its location, and the rate of the Red Army's advance. I knew that I should not risk my life because I was the only survivor in my family, and that I must do everything to stay alive and continue our family dynasty, which I would re-establish. As a Jew!

But how long could I go on concealing my Jewish identity from the family with whom I was staying? Soon I would stop being a minor who did not need an identity card. Applying for such a document would require a declaration that I was Jewish!

And then how would Anuska Karpowicz react? How would Peter react? And how would other villagers react after learning that I had been lying all the time that I had been among them, pretending to be a Christian? Actually, this should not have bothered me any more—necessity knows no law, as they say. I had wished to remain alive, and as a Jew, I would not have succeeded.

I reached my final decision—in a month's time I must leave the village and go to Trembowla. I would certainly find a few Jews there who had somehow managed to survive. They would no doubt come to the village, because naturally everyone would return home to find out if other members of the family had survived.

What still bothered me was the question of what to tell the Karpowicz family about my identity. Should I reveal the fact that I was a Jew?

I don't know why, but at the time I feared that such a revelation would shock them, and then they might take revenge on me! But how and why? I didn't know the answer then and I don't know even today. By the way, that village was a mixed village called Malinisky, with a Ukrainian minority and a Polish majority. In Chapter 8 of his book, "Bridal Fund," S.Y. Agnon mentions the Malinisky village. Today, several decades later, when pondering those months I spent in Malinisky, I am convinced that I behaved foolishly and carelessly, in a way that could have led to the exposure of my identity and my delivery to the Nazis.

But everything went well. Even if someone suspected that I was a Jew disguised as a Christian, he kept this to himself and did not state it openly. I stayed nine months in Malinisky, and my relations with everybody, not only with those where I worked, were excellent. I am not sure that this would have been the situation had I stayed there another nine months. That something would have backfired, and that my secret would have been uncovered is clear to me now.

And then they probably would have handed me over to the Germans, not only because I was Jewish but also as a punishment for disguising myself as a Christian, a religious Ukrainian child, which in their eyes—and in the eyes of most if not all the inhabitants—was an insult to their religion.

The liberation of our region from the Germans occurred in the spring of 1944—about the end of March or the beginning of April of that year—but of course I didn't know at that time that the war would go on for another thirteen months until the final defeat of the Germans . . .

During that time, while fighting for their own country, the Germans did not concentrate all their efforts only on defending Germany but rather continued to exterminate, to kill, and to murder with complete brutality more and more Jews, whom they saw as their real enemy. Despite the pressure exerted on them by the allied armies of their enemies, the Nazis were

determined to kill every remaining Jew in all areas that were still under their occupation.

But let us return to my preparations for leaving the Karpowicz family to return to my native town, Trembowla, and the surviving Jews, those we now refer to as "*she'erit hapleitah*."

The villages and forests around us were full of Red Army camps. I told the Karpowicz family that the time had come for me to visit my grandmother and hear about what had happened to my parents. Maybe they had returned from Germany and were waiting for me at home! I told them this so they would not worry should I suddenly leave. Now they would assume that I had gone away only for a few days, and that I would come back to them, especially as I left behind me everything that I had earned for my work. They would probably expect me to return with my father, if he had come back from Germany, but they would not suspect that I had left them for good.

I don't remember exactly what day of the week it was. I only remember that it was a warm and pleasant spring day. I arose at three in the morning and went into the forest, which was not far from the house. While walking in the forest, I prepared my story in case I should meet a neighbor or a Russian soldier who might question me. I would say that I was looking for a bolting horse that had probably gone astray in the forest. As this occurred frequently, my explanation would be quite reasonable.

But, what actually happened was something quite different from what I had expected.

After I had already advanced far into the forest, close to the road and in the direction of Trembowla, I was attracted by the smell of cooking porridge. When I approached to see who was cooking, I heard a voice addressing me in Russian.

"You are just in time, comrade!" The voice belonged to a smiling Russian soldier. "The porridge is ready, and if you are not in a special hurry, you can sit here on this box and enjoy some hot, sweet porridge. I sweetened it with some sugar that

the Germans forgot to take with them when they fled like mice from a cat."

For a moment, I was afraid of staying among the soldiers, but when they began coming out of their tents to get their share of the hot porridge, I calmed down and accepted the invitation, especially after a young soldier, who was about 20 years old, threw me a metal bowl and said: "Catch it. The cook will fill it with porridge for you."

I caught the bowl, received the hot, sweet porridge, and sat down to eat it with them. I must point out that nobody asked me who I was, where I came from, or where I was going! After drinking something they called tea, but was actually no more than hot, sweet water, I said farewell and continued on my journey, but this time I walked on the road, expecting to get a lift. On my way I passed a milestone showing the distance to a village named Podhiczoki, which meant that I was on the right way. A few minutes later I hitched a ride on the wagon of a farmer who took me to Podhiczoki.

Entering the village, I remembered how over nine months ago I had gone by it without entering. And now, under the smiling sun, I smiled to myself at the thought that now I was walking freely, in daytime rather than in the dark, back to my native town and not escaping from it and from the death that had been in the air then.

As I have already mentioned, it was a summer day, when farmers usually walk barefoot, and I did likewise. I had left the house like that, without boots. I remembered from my childhood that in the summer, the Gentiles who came into town to sell their goods were barefoot. I managed to hitch a ride on another wagon, which advanced me a few miles, but most of the way I had to walk. I had enough food because I had taken bread, cheese, and fruit from the house, wrapped it all in a scarf, and attached it all to the end of stick that also served as a weapon against dogs who might want to attack me.

After a while I decided to take a break and rest in the field. I filled my cap with spring water and drank quickly before

the water ran out of the cap. I lay on the grass for awhile, dozing a little, and then got up and continued to walk. I passed another milestone showing that I had to walk eight miles more to reach Trembowla, which meant that I had completed over half of my journey. I tried to hitch a ride with a car to reach my town faster, but all the vehicles on the road were military and none stopped for me. I didn't feel like riding on a wagon again because the pits on the road caused very unpleasant bumping. If I had a bicycle to ride on, I thought, I would arrive faster.

I began to feel pain in my legs from the prolonged walking, but finally I reached the town, and the first thing I did was knock on the door of Malik's house. They were very happy to see me, of course, and insisted that I eat supper with them and sleep overnight as well.

"As I have told you repeatedly," Malik said, "our house is your house, and you are a welcome guest whenever you come and for any length of time."

"You can stay with us forever," his wife added. "We will treat you like our own son."

Not all Gentiles were like this—and that's a shame! Life would have been different if all of them had been like this. I thanked them for their friendliness and sat down to eat with them. And as I was very tired, I took a bath in the tub of hot water that she had prepared for me and then went to bed.

I arose at five in the morning, the time Malik usually got up, and helped him with some work around the house. While we were working, Malik told me that the front was very far away, and nobody in the village feared that the Germans would manage to return and recapture the place after a counter-attack. He had met a few Jews in the town and even told me where they lived.

"Why are you walking barefoot?" he asked looking at my feet. "Don't you have any shoes?"

I told him that my boots had wooden soles. Walking with them was difficult, and they were too heavy to carry on my

back. “Besides, everyone in the village walks barefoot in the summer.”

He offered to lend me some money to buy something to put on, boots, shoes or sandals, whatever I could find, because not everything was available then, during the war. At first I refused to take money from him, but he really urged me to take it, so I agreed.

“Here, in town, you can't walk barefoot like you do in the village,” he said. “The savages, the Nazis, have already been expelled from here, and you must start behaving again like a civilized person.” Suddenly, he embraced me warmly and, with tears in his eyes, went on saying: “You have no idea how happy I am to see you alive! The good Lord wanted you to survive and to have a good life, so don't reject my desire to help you!” He made the sign of the cross very piously and wiped the tears from his eyes.

“We, my wife and I,” he continued after a while, “are weak people. May God forgive us! We were afraid of the Germans and did not trust God to protect us, and we did not take many Jews into our house, as we actually wanted to. The Germans would have sentenced to death anyone helping Jews!”

At about ten o’clock, I left them, after promising to return for supper, and went into town. In town I met about twenty or thirty Jews, who had returned home from hell to see if anyone from their families had survived. With time some two hundred additional Jews arrived to join this handful of survivors. The newcomers had found refuge in Russia, where they had been inducted into the Red Army to fight the Germans and thus remained alive.

After spending nine months in the village disguised as a Gentile, I looked good. I had not only worked hard but also eaten well. In contrast, the young men that I met now looked like walking skeletons. They had experienced a very difficult winter. In addition to the constant fear of the Germans or of the Gentiles who were collaborating with the Nazis in exterminating the Jews, they had suffered from the terrible cold and from

hunger. They expressed openly, however, their joy at meeting another Jew who had survived the Nazis. Almost everyone still recognized me from the ghetto period, and some of them even knew Malik. I learned that an officer in charge of Jewish affairs sat in the regional military commander's office, which was located in the municipal building of the town.

"This officer helps Jews with equipment, clothing, food, and even with apartments," they told me.

When I told Malik about this in the evening, he responded: "But this is not for you. With us you will always have an open house with food and work."

His wife thought the same, but I did not change my mind. I said that I wanted to live among Jews, and they finally agreed with me.

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The next morning I went to the municipality and applied for a permit to get an apartment. Many apartments were vacant. Before the German occupation, about five thousand Jews had lived in Trembowla, and only a few dozen had survived, so the apartments of all the Jews in the town were vacant. They still contained the fixed furnishings that the Gentile 'heirs' couldn't steal. But nevertheless, all the apartments were now owned by the Russian authorities, so one needed a permit to occupy one of them.

The official who took care of the Jews treated me nicely. He listened to my request, examining me with a smile, and finally said: "We don't approve apartments for children."

Although I was fourteen-and-a-half, I looked like a twelve-year-old because I was short.

"I think," he added, "that I should send you to an orphanage. You will receive lodging, clothes, and food there."

"Is the orphanage only for Jewish children?"

"We do not discriminate according to nationality or religion. Everyone is equal here. We have Polish, Ukrainian, and also Jewish orphans there," he replied.

"How many Jewish children there are my age?"

"None of your age right now, but two younger ones are there," the clerk answered. "But why does it bother you so much? The Red Army liberated you, and soon they will occupy Berlin, bringing an end to the German fascists!"

"How far away is the front-line today?" I asked.

"Far. Very far as a matter of fact. Hundreds of miles from here. The blows that the Nazis are suffering from the Red Army are so severe that no danger exists that the Germans will ever return to lift up their heads again." He fixed his eyes on me. "Well? Have you decided?"

"That at this point I am not interested in an orphanage," I said. "Although I am short and look younger, I am fourteen-and-a-half, and I wish to live where all the other Jews live."

"Fourteen-and-a-half? That's something different," the official said. "Go and look for a suitable room, then come back to get the housing permit."

"Thank you," I said and turned to leave.

"Bring me the name of the street and the number of the house," he added.

I left and by later that day I had already returned to provide the necessary details, the name of the street and the number of the house where I had found a suitable room. Then I went to the market-place and bought myself a pair of used sandals because new ones were not available. The war had stopped all production and even destroyed the workshops where new commodities were produced, so we had to be satisfied with old things.

The next day I stayed with Malik to help him with his field work. His plot of land was a narrow strip between the forest and the town. Two days later I went to the municipal building and received the permit, which was ready for me. With some additional money that I had borrowed from Malik, I purchased a bed, bedding, and a few items of furniture. I could have obtained all these things from the municipality for nothing, but I didn't like anything that they offered me, so I turned down the offer. I found it hard to agree to use bedclothes that had been used by those who had been taken for extermination. . . .

Having arranged my dwelling, I immediately began to work for a woman named Poznachowska, who owned a stall for

various things in the market. I helped her with selling, and once a week I even took the bus to Tarnopol, a district city, to buy merchandise.

And what kind of merchandise did Mrs. Poznachowska deal with?

All kinds of useful everyday things that were hard to get because of the war, such as cigarettes, tobacco, matches, soap, dye for clothes, and similar things that I don't remember any more.

The woman's husband was in the Red Army. She had two small children, a five-year-old boy and a three-year-old girl. She was Ukrainian, but having married a Pole she had become Polish according to the local custom. In fact, this was true for the opposite case as well.

She paid me well for my work. She was known as a person who had helped Jews a lot during the ghetto period and even after its liquidation. During the ghetto period, two children used to come to her: two boys, aged 13 and 16, and also their married twenty-two-year-old sister, Rosia, who died two weeks before the town was liberated by the Red Army. The two brothers, Nissan and Benjamin Wachtel, now live in Israel. One lives in Bat-Yam and the other in Givataim. They are married with children and grandchildren. They would come to the woman late at night, and she helped them almost every day with food. In fact, it is impossible to evaluate the magnitude of the help that she had given to the Jews—and without payment! Such a contrast from other Gentiles, who had taken gold and silver from the Jews, promising to help them but finally delivering them into the hands of the Nazis, who exterminated them.

Naturally she had constantly risked her own life. Had someone informed against her, the Nazis would have immediately sentenced her to execution. Thanks to this righteous woman, Nissan and Benjamin Wachtel survived.

Every Tuesday was market-day in our town. Farmers from all the surrounding villages would bring their produce for

sale, using this opportunity to shop for themselves as well. I would look for familiar Gentiles from Malinisky village and asked them to give my regards to the Karpowicz family . . . . Once I even sent a detailed letter with somebody to the family.

Most of the farmers, who had known me well, did not believe me when I told them that I was a Jew. Some of them were even frightened; they distanced themselves from me while repeatedly making the sign of the cross. "No! No!" said one, a farmer whose house was closest to the Karpowicz house. On more than one occasion, whenever he had needed another pair of hands, I would help him with his yard work. And now the look in his eyes revealed that he thought I was Satan or one of his followers. "You can't be a Jew! You don't look like a Jew! You look like one of us! You prayed beside me in the village church!"

That was that! It was hard to convince them that they had hidden a Jewish boy in their village and had saved him from extermination by the Nazis!

To those who charged (stuttering and not speaking out loud, naturally) that I had cheated and lied to them—one even complained that it was as though I had desecrated their religion by masquerading as a pious Christian—I said that I do not have to justify myself.

They knew what my fate would have been had they known my true identity. The Nazis would have killed me on the spot! The fear of death, the desire to live—both are highly justified, and they forced me to behave as I did, I maintained. "But now everyone knows that I am a Jew!" I declared proudly. "It is true that my whole family was exterminated! My father, my mother, my brother, and my little sister were brutally executed, and all because of a single crime—they were Jews!"

Finally, after many inquiries about why no member of the Karpowicz family had come to the market, I found out that Peter himself had been inducted into the Red Army and sent to the front. The old grandmother had died, and the mother,

Anuska, was sick and depressed because Peter was in the army, leaving behind his young wife and two-month-old baby.

So who was left to come to the market? Yes, Anuska had received my letter and, as I was told, she had had difficulty in believing that I was a Jew but had finally come to accept it. But then something else had given her another reason to grieve.

Besides losing Peter to the army, she had also lost a "son-in-law." During all that time she had regarded me as her daughter's future husband, and now this son-in-law had turned out to be a Jew!

Mrs. Poznachowska would come to the market-place after taking her older boy to the kindergarten. She would bring the baby with her in a pram, and most of the time he slept beside her stall.

Every Thursday I was free for three or four hours, and I would go to places where Jews assembled, looking for family members, or relatives, or friends who might have survived.

Although I did not believe that my father had survived, I went on asking about him, but except for the information that the ghetto where he lived had been liquidated and all the Jews in it exterminated, I didn't hear anything new.

No, not all the Gentiles that I met from the village where I had worked were frightened by the news that I was a Jew. Some told me they had suspected this even before, but had not expressed their thoughts to others for fear that they would destroy me. This was especially true of the Poles. Perhaps they did this not because they liked Jews but rather because they hated the Germans, who had invaded their country and occupied it, I don't know. Some invited me to visit them in the village, promising to welcome me willingly and gladly.

"But hurry, come soon," one of them said, while the others agreed with him, nodding their heads. "There are serious rumors about an evacuation soon."

"Evacuation?" I asked in amazement.

"Transfer," they explained.

"Of the Poles," they added.

Evacuation, or transfer, meant moving all the Poles—the farmers in the first stage—from the Ukraine to Silesia. Silesia had belonged to Germany and now, following their defeat, the German inhabitants were being transferred to Germany, and the Poles were to be settled in their place. The transfer was complete, without any exceptions, no matter how many generations of Poles had lived in th Ukraine. In many cases, these were the descendants, generation after generation, of inhabitants who had lived in the Ukraine since ancient times. They were, in fact, Ukrainians in every way—distinguishable only by their different religion.

I heard that the Ukrainian Bandera underground movement had become more active recently. At night they would attack Polish houses in the villages, shooting, burning, and making pogroms. Some said that these were not Bandera's men but rather government gangs that were creating the impression of murderous underground activities against the Poles, to frighten them and to stimulate them to escape.

This explanation was reasonable, but who could know? The Russian press—no other press existed at that time—didn't mention this subject at all. But I was not surprised. I knew that under a Communist regime anything could happen. The Communists were capable—and they had proved it—of clearing a town of thirty-thousand inhabitants within forty-eight hours. The civilians knew that they had to obey such orders without reflection or delay. They knew that disobedience meant, at best, immediate deportation to Siberia and, in the worst case, imprisonment for twenty years.

As for me, I had no time to think of all that. I was interested in the fate of my father and other relatives of mine. One day I went to a house called Kepalowka, which had been our last home in the ghetto. Apart from shattered windows and doors, I did not find any trace of my family. Perhaps a picture, something as a souvenir. I went up to the attic, but except for dirt and scrap and broken furniture, I did not find anything to suggest that the Ronis family had ever existed! From the entire

family, I was the last survivor! The truth—even though I had known it I for a long time—overwhelmed me! I am the last. Thus, the holy task—yes, holy!—of rebuilding the family had fallen on me! And that I would do! My determination was firm.

The transfer—or deportation—of the Poles was not opposed by their Ukrainian neighbors. The opposite was true. The Ukrainians were glad to see what was happening to the Poles, exactly as they had watched the actions against the Jews who had been their neighbors for generations. But not all Ukrainians, I must state, not all of them. Some Ukrainians, very few but some, had not sympathized with what the Germans were doing to the Jews. But nevertheless, the transfer of the Poles by the Russians cannot be compared to the genocide—the total extermination—of the Jews by the Germans.

But what would happen to Mrs. Poznachowska and her children? One day this thought struck me suddenly. Rumors were circulating that after transferring the Polish farmers, the Communist regime would be free to do the same to the urban Poles. And to everyone, Mrs. Poznachowska and her children were Poles!

I decided to remain by her side and help her, at least until her husband returned from the army. But that would be a long time from now. Meanwhile everything in town was quiet, except for the rumors about the expected transfer of the Poles, but for the time being they were only rumors.

In the meantime, I continued to work, earning money and repaying my debt to Malik. The elder brother in the Wachtel family, Benjamin, left the Ukraine and went to Romania and from there, as I learned later, traveled to *Eretz Israel*. The younger brother, Nissan, came to stay with me.

With the money I had earned I bought myself clothes and shoes and a bicycle as well. In fact, the bicycle was a Russian product, but I didn't know about any other kind of bicycle and besides, the matter wasn't so important to me. The Russian bicycle was good and suited my needs.

The flight of the Poles from the Ukraine that resulted from the pogroms conducted by the Bandera gangs increased with time. The Poles left everything behind, saving only their lives because incidents of murdering Poles were multiplying day by day.

And what about the authorities? The Communists helped the Poles by providing trains to Silesia. They were allotted special train cars and were allowed to take with them everything they wanted. Even special cars for animals were placed at their disposal. Not in large numbers, of course, but if he so desired, a farmer could take with him one or two cows and one or two pigs. But only a small part of what they had taken with them would arrive at their new location—and complaints to the Russian authorities were futile—so the fugitives carried mostly foodstuffs.

But let us return to the main story. I went on working for Mrs. Poznachowska. Once a week I would visit Malik, always bringing some gifts. Especially for their small son. After I told Malik about my weekly journeys to the market in Tarnopol, he gave me money and asked me to buy a few things for them.

I spoke to him about the transfer of the Poles, and he told me that despite being a farmer, he was considered urban and that he trusted in God, Mary, and Jesus to protect him. Even when more and more Poles were fleeing, Malik and his wife did not despair. As devout Catholics, they continued to trust in God, in his son, and in the holy virgin to protect them.

No transfer order was made against the Jews. First, the number of Jewish survivors was very small. And second, the few remaining Jews preferred to join the Poles rather than staying with the Ukrainians. Despite all the pogroms and persecutions for which the Poles had been responsible in the past, the Jews preferred the Poles to the Ukrainians. The restrictions and liquidations that had been the fate of the Ukrainian Jews since the times of Chmelnicki—one-hundred-thousand Jews were brutally murdered at that time—were not forgotten, even after all these years. The Jews

also remembered the pogroms made by Petlyura's men immediately after World War I—one-hundred-thousand Jews were murdered then as well! The Poles had been more moderate than the Ukrainians in persecuting the Jews.

"After expelling the rural Poles," Mrs. Poznachowska told Nissan and me one day, "they will begin to deport the urban Poles. The Jews will leave together with the Poles. They will not stay with the Ukrainians."

Some of them, she said, would emigrate to America, others to *Eretz Israel*.

Again—*Eretz Israel*! This was the second time lately that I had heard about *Eretz Israel*! Indeed, during my childhood I had heard about Herzl, Jabotinsky, and Palestine, but I had forgotten what it was exactly. What I did know about Palestine was that Arabs and Jews live there and fight each other all the time. Yes, I remembered hearing about an aunt who lived there, in Palestine or *Eretz Israel*!

One day Mrs. Poznachowska told me that soon the Poles in our town would begin registering for the transfer to Silesia.

"I suggest," she said, "that you and Nissan come and live in my apartment. I will vacate one of the four rooms in my apartment for you."

"Why," I wondered, knowing that she would not have come up with this suggestion without having a good reason for it.

"We will all register on the same form," she explained, "as though we are one family. You are still young, and I will appear on the form as your guardian. . . . I will help you and you will help me. Making my way alone with two small children will be difficult. And it will be easier for you too."

Naturally I could not decide on behalf of Nissan, so I told him about the suggestion and asked him what he thought about it.

"Yes, of course," Nissan answered at once. "She helped me very much during the German occupation, and it would be nice if we help her now. . . ."

In short, we moved to her place temporarily. We returned the keys to our apartment to the municipality. We did not take the furniture with us and nobody would buy it, so we managed with only our blankets, bedding, clothes, shoes, and the bicycle! We went on working in the market, despite the reduced amount of work now because of the diminished population. Many Poles had already left, while the Ukrainians, who were expected to replace them, had not yet come.

Mrs. Poznachowska's house faced what had been the ghetto. In fact, it was across the street, adjacent to the big building that I mentioned before, which had once been a school but now had been transformed by the Russians into a military hospital.

A large park with many trees and flower beds was next to the building. The sick and the wounded patients would come down from the hospital to walk in the park or to sit on the benches, under the devoted supervision of the nurses. I would go the park often, and as I spoke Russian fluently, I made many friends there.

Most of them asked me for only one thing—vodka! They had enough money, and I used it to buy them homemade vodka from the Gentiles. Original, genuine vodka was not available, and despite the unpleasant smell of homemade vodka, the Russians bought it willingly. In exchange, I would receive money, or clothes—mainly civilian—and boots, that the Russians had looted during the war.

In general, the Russian soldiers were honest and treated me nicely, although one of them tried to cheat me once. The soldier ordered a bottle of vodka from me, and I asked him for payment before going to the fence to take the bottle from Nissan, who was standing behind the fence and watching the bottles. When I brought the bottle to the soldier and asked for payment, he said he does not buy vodka before tasting it. Maybe you filled the bottle with water and you want to sell it to me instead of vodka. He tasted! Half of the bottle was emptied at one gulp.

"I don't like it!" he said after "tasting" as he returned the half-empty bottle to me.

"So why did you drink half the bottle?" I argued. "For a taste, one small sip would have been enough."

"I'll pay you for half a bottle," said the Russian as he pulled a few copecks out of his pocket and handed them to me.

Those copecks were not worth very much, but I had no choice. Could I quarrel with a wounded soldier?

But this incident was unique, or almost unique. Usually those who didn't have money or clothes to exchange for the vodka gave me meat cans from the U.S.A. or American cigarettes. After we moved to Mrs. Poznachowska's house, Nissan and I continued to do business with the Russians from the hospital for about two more months. This trade was illegal, but the Russian police ignored it. Had the Russians wanted to enforce the law, both of us would have been in big trouble. Nothing would have helped us. The fact that I had survived, a child without parents or relatives, wouldn't have influenced them. I was not "the only child" in those days. Hundreds of thousands of twelve- or fourteen-year-old children had been exterminated by the Nazis, with thousands remaining orphans without a family. . . .

Actually, I was lucky that the war had come to an end just when it did. Had it continued for another few months, not a single Jew would have remained in Poland, including myself.

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13

Kamionka
as told by Sam Halpern

I was nineteen years old when the Russian tanks arrived in my native town, Chorostkow, on September 17, 1939. On June 22, 1941, after the Russians had occupied Chorostkow for two years, Germany declared war on the Soviet Union. My brother Arie and I had already decided not to flee to Russia, agreeing that we should stay home and not leave our parents alone at such a critical time. In early July of 1941, the German demons of death and destruction entered Chorostkow. By now the gang of murderers had reached the secret decision known as 'The Final Solution of the Jewish Question,' and all the Jews of Europe had been targeted for annihilation.

To avoid being sent to a forced labor camp, I worked on a farm administered by the Germans from July 1941 until March 19, 1942, when an enormous snowstorm hit the region. The Germans told the *Judenrat* to assemble a large group of workers to clear the snow on the road from the town to the railroad station. After shoveling snow for about half an hour, we were ordered to leave the shovels and go with the Ukrainian police. We walked twenty-five kilometers to a town called Chortkow, where we were taken to a jailhouse. I was herded into a small cell packed with about sixty men. After standing packed together like that for three nights and days, we were permitted to lap just one sip from a tub of water and then were forced to run about one kilometer to a railroad station, where cattle cars, with no steps or ramps leading to the doors, stood on the tracks. The SS officers beat the people at the front of the line, while yelling at them to crouch down to form human steps for the others to

climb on. Their groans and cries were drowned out by the screaming and cracking of whips as the Germans yelled and clubbed the rest of us to hurry into the cars. After squeezing about 120 men into each car, the Germans threw in some bread and locked the doors from the outside.

After three full days without any food, we waited for hours in the sealed cattle car, taking turns standing by the wall to draw fresh air from between the cracks. The floor beneath our feet was the only place to heed the call of nature; we had no food, no information, no sense of destination. After three wrenching days in these conditions, the doors to the cattle cars were finally opened, and ear-piercing screams ordered us out. We had arrived at the slave labor camp Kamionka, located near the city of Tarnopol, about 50 kilometers away from Chorostkow.

"*Los schnell! Los schnell!*" the Germans screamed. "Do it fast, do it fast," while beating us with sticks and rifle butts. We were starving, dehydrated, and weak, yet we were made to run two kilometers to the labor camp. The cloud of death hung over the camp that stood before us, and the fields were gray and brown and lifeless. Before the war, this clearing in the woods had been the site of a large farm. The stables, formerly used for cattle and horses, had since been converted into barracks for inmates. The entire compound was surrounded by a high fenced of barbed wire; in each corner was a tall watchtower manned by Germans with machine guns. Two gates, one in front and one in back, were guarded by Ukrainian policemen.

When our group of five hundred men arrived at Kamionka, many people—maybe three-to-four thousand in total—were already there. The inmates—about fifty Russians, a hundred Poles, and thousands of Jews—were absolutely filthy, and all were so thin that they looked half-dead. To differentiate Jew from Gentile, each wore a two-inch by two-inch cloth square—the Russians and Poles a red one, the Jews a yellow one. The men moved around the yard of trampled dirt as though

they were sleepwalking. Although the body lived on, for many the spirit was already gone.

A German officer stopped our group at the entrance and ordered:

"Hand over your watches, rings, any other jewelry, and money. If we find something that hasn't been turned in, you will be shot immediately."

The German soldiers continued to lash out at us with a club to the stomach, a slap across the face as we went though our pockets for coins and bills. They never interrupted this sadistic amusement. Once the valuables were confiscated, we were marched toward the central yard of the camp. As we had not had anything to drink in days, one man took a couple of steps out of line to eat some snow. He was shot to death! The Germans and the Ukrainian guards laughed, taking great pleasure in terrifying us and certainly wanting us to see who was the master in Kamionka and who was the slave. The monsters who controlled our fate thus informed us what our lives were worth to them: nothing.

We were given the only utensil we would ever receive—a small tin cup with a narrow handle, which we had to bring to receive our meager rations. Without the cup, a person received nothing. We stood in line for soup, which was really dirty water with some potato, but I didn't care. Between 300 and 400 people were waiting in this line for food. I went over to talk to a friend of mine from Chorostkow, but one of the kapos came up behind me and, with a wide, flat stick, hit me so hard across the back and shoulders that my eyes dimmed. "Go back to your place in line!" he yelled. This terrible, frightening blow, along with the man shot for wanting a lick of snow, were my introduction to the hell that passed for life in the slave labor camp of Kamionka.

Next we were lined up and ordered to call out our names as we passed in front of the German officers. One of the men called out 'Adolf Hitler' when asked his name and was immediately hit in the face with great force. He fell to the ground and was again asked his name. He answered, 'Adolf

Hitler,' for this, indeed, was his real name. The Germans pounced on him and began to beat him mercilessly. He then called out his mother's maiden name, and the Germans stopped the beating and allowed him to return to the line.

That first evening, after gulping down one tin cup of 'soup', we were taken to the barracks. Originally built for animals, the only modification the stables had undergone to accommodate human beings was the installation of three or four levels of long, horizontal planks of unfinished wood for beds. The wind blew through the cracks in the old walls. The place was infested with lice, and within a matter of hours all of us were dirty with them too. The wooden planks had no mattresses, no straw, and certainly no blankets. For many of the sixteen months I was there, I used as my blanket a short coat that I had brought with me. Hundreds of people were crammed into each of the barracks, and they slept on the planks, the floors, anywhere they could find space. We had less than two feet each to lie in, and if one person wanted to turn over, everyone on either side of him on the long plank had to turn over as well.

One of the main tasks assigned to inmates in this labor camp was to fix the highway that stretched from Berlin to Kiev. Kamionka was located right beside this major artery (which also happened to run through Lvov), and our most important responsibility was to maintain the road. Day and night German trucks and tanks rolled along this route, taking supplies and soldiers to the eastern front and back again to Berlin. As all this activity exacted a heavy toll on the road, the surface demanded constant repair.

We were awakened at 5:30 in the morning and given two minutes to dress. Anyone not ready was badly beaten. Only after everyone in the barracks was ready were we allowed to stand in line for a cup of ersatz coffee, which was really dirty warm water. They also gave us a piece of bread (made from flour mixed with sawdust), often so hard and moldy that it could hardly be eaten. As this was our entire food ration for the day, some saved the bread for 'lunch' while others, unable to abide

the gnawing hunger in their stomachs, chewed on it immediately. I tried to save mine for later in the day, knowing that as hungry as I was upon waking, I would become much more so as the day wore on and the hours of physical labor took their toll on my body's limited resources. After this meager meal, the thousands of camp inmates were made to stand outside in the yard, in straight lines, from six until eight in the morning. It did not matter if the brilliant summer sun was shining, or if the deathly winds of winter were blowing; we had to stand still for two hours. Rain, snow, withering heat. It was the second phase of torture that was routinely worked into every day.

A few minutes before eight, the *hauptsturmführer* (the camp commander), Paul Rebel, would come into the yard with his dog and watch the *lagerführer* (the manager of Kamionka, who was also a Jew) delegate work details. We were taken to work in groups of 250 or 500. Some men went to the *steinbrochen*, the stone chopping corps; others to the *strassenbau*, the road crew, where the road was swept and cleared of snow and debris; and the rest went to the *eisenbahn*, the railroad corps. No matter which group I was in, we always had to walk eight, ten, or twelve kilometers to the work site. Often we had to carry heavy tools back and forth. No matter what the weather conditions, we had to walk, and always, *schnell! schnell!* (fast, fast). The Germans wanted us to do things quickly so that we wouldn't have time to think, so that we wouldn't have a moment's rest.

Eventually the *Judenrat* leaders of Chorostkow, Chortkow, Kopychince, Probyzna, Tluste, and Lvov made arrangements with the officers at Kamionka to allow us to receive packages from the outside. Twice a month the *Judenrat* would come to Kamionka with food packages. There was bread, jam, and sometimes salami that my mother always sent, literally a life saver, and then a blanket, sweater, coat, and scarves. These packages were my link to the outside world, evidence that I was not forgotten, left to die among barbarian rulers. Even after this connection was discontinued, someone from Chorostkow would

come to Kamionka with smaller packages and bribe a German guard to let the supplies into the camp. Over time, this practice occurred less frequently but still sustained our ties with the rest of the world.

When I first arrived in camp, I was taken to the road crew to clear the snow. One major advantage of this job was my proximity to large quantities of snow, which I would use to wash myself, although it was filthy from vehicular traffic. Keeping up some degree of personal hygiene contributed greatly to maintaining a strong psychological profile and bolstering my feeling of still being a human being. I would not allow myself to drift into the kind of bodily filth usually associated with certain animals or the mentally ill who no longer know how to care for themselves. The other crucial benefit of the snow was that I could eat it. The Germans gave us only two small portions of dirty water a day to drink—early in the morning and in the evening. To keep up proper hydration, throughout the day I would chew on snow to quench my thirst.

Once during a real thunderstorm, about two hundred of us were walking through the mud and slush, with dampness cutting through our thin clothing and settling in our aching joints. A Ukrainian policeman ordered us to sing a Jewish song *Vitaher Libaynu (Our Hearts Quicken* to do God's work*)*. Everyone else complied, only I didn't. Hungry, thirsty, and tired, I was in no mood to sing. A Ukrainian policeman hit me so hard on my shoulder with his rifle butt that I blacked out momentarily. After that, I had to join in song, once again learning that a man in uniform feels that he has the power of life and death over inmates. We were their puppets and they the evil puppeteers relishing their sadism. A German officer named Klein liked to see blood and would hit a person over the head for no reason. If he saw blood right away, he would stop hitting, but if the injury did not bleed, he would continue to pummel the individual until blood flowed from the body. Satisfied, he would stop, smile, and walk away. I was never hit by him.

About two months later, I was sent to the stone works and given a sledgehammer to chop stone for road repairs. There, on the Berlin-Kiev road, just like our ancestors before us in Egypt, Jewish labor created the bricks for the empire. At the end of a day spent breaking stone without stopping, without anything to eat, we would walk the eight or nine kilometers back to camp, where we would be given some so-called soup. Again, it was really dirty water with a piece of cabbage or slice of potato in it. Sometimes, if a horse were killed or an old one died, its flesh would be thrown into the soup. I could not consume the horse's flesh, I drank only the liquid and gave the meat to others.

To honor the Sabbath, on Friday nights we tried to recreate the custom of *Lechem Moshne* (two loaves) by hoarding our bread so that we should have two pieces. We welcomed the Sabbath Queen with *Shalom aleichem* (Welcome to you) and other *z'mirot* that reminded us of better days at home.

We worked seven days a week, from eight in the morning until seven in the evening, except for Sunday when we could stop work at one o'clock in the afternoon, and most people collapsed into sleep. Most did not survive these conditions. So many died as a result of the beatings they received while working on the road, while chopping stone, while standing around inside the camp, that in my barracks about fifteen or twenty men (of the hundreds living there) would rise early to gather together a *minyan* (quorum) to recite the *Kaddish* (prayer) for the dead.

The local population, Poles and Ukrainians who were interned in the camp for criminal conduct in civilian life, were not treated any differently from the Jews, receiving the same barracks, the same meager amount of food, and the same back-breaking work. In contrast to the enduring spirit of the Jews, however, many Poles and Ukrainians were fading away after three months, unable to maintain their previously superior physical stamina with little food. As with the Jews, the first sign

of weakness in the Polish or Ukrainian inmates would mean death at German hands.

For no reason at all, any one of the SS or Ukrainian policemen would beat a randomly chosen man almost to death. One Pole named Janek was especially vicious, pleasure glowing in his face when he brutally beat a weak Jew. Janek was a sadist who had never had so much fun in his life. As I hammered the rock with a sledgehammer, I would watch out of the corner of my eye and wonder how a person could treat another human being like a rock in a quarry. The Germans and Ukrainians ruling our lives acted as though, like the stone we worked on, we felt no pain. They seemed to believe that we existed to fulfill their needs and desires, as if the meaning of our lives was to provide them with props for their evil drama.

Sometime later I was sent to lay railroad track for the Berlin-Kiev line, where we had to drag by hand enormously heavy railroad ties into place. During the half-hour break permitted by the Germans, the guards enjoyed beating us with their own hands. The direct contact, flesh against flesh, was far more satisfying to them than a bullet from a gun, although there was no shortage of that either. One day my friend Zigale, a young boy from Kopychince, was working by the railroad when a Ukrainian police officer told him to lift a very heavy rail tie.

Weak and tired, young, and not thinking clearly about how to survive, Zigale answered: "I can't do it."

The Ukrainian hit him with a shovel and thundered "Lift it!"

And then Zigale shouted back, "You shouldn't hit me. The Russians are coming, and then you'll be sorry."

Everyone shuddered with fear. We had heard news from the ghetto that the Russian front was advancing, but throwing this information in the face of a Ukrainian police officer, who had everything to lose and everything to hide from his enemy, was not wise. The Ukrainian grew red in the face with rage and started to pound Zigale with the shovel, time after time after time, only stopping when Zigale's body lay motionless on the

ground, curled up in a fetal position, like a small boy sleeping. He was dead, killed for voicing the hope that all of us carried within like a burning torch—the hope of liberation, of survival.

At first I had to sleep on the bottom bunk. As more people were killed, more space opened up on upper bunks, and a person would eventually work his way up. The only advantage to sleeping on the bottom bunk was that it was close to the floor, where a small board had been pried loose to create a cubby hole for hiding small items. During the days when I was receiving packages, my father had sent me a little wooden box, which I hid in the cubby hole. I would also put in there, in the box in the cubby hole, the contents of anything sent to me from home: some bread, shoes, a pair of pants. Several of us would use this secret space to hide prized possessions, because anything left lying around would be stolen.

One late afternoon in October, I returned to the barracks and saw that the floorboard I had used as a locker had been nailed shut. Not only had our things been taken but our names were in the box, so we could be identified. We all wondered what would happen next. We knew that this sort of offense was often punished by death. I was tense with anticipation.

The next day one of the older men, who was weak and basically waiting for the order to be killed, said blandly, "You have to report to the main office."

This was it. I expected the worst: Death had come to greet me. When I reached the main office, one of the other men from Chorostkow, who had kept things under the floorboard with me, had asked for his possessions back, trying to explain to the Germans why he had hidden them. They hit him, and the more he spoke, the more terrible were the blows. They hated him even for his efforts; they did not want to be reminded of his humanity, so they silenced him. When he could no longer move, they made him lie on his stomach and gave him twenty-five lashes on his back.

When I was questioned, knowing that explanations would only make matters worse, I said nothing more than

answering their questions: that my name is Shmerko Halpern and that this is my box.

"Lie down," they said. I lay down on my stomach, and they began to strike me with a heavy wooden stick. I did not cry out but absorbed the pain as quietly as possible, each blow so painful that I thought I would faint. I did not expect to live through it. When the Germans were through with me, my backside was bruised as black as a leather shoe, a solid plane of ruptured blood vessels. The entire area was numb from shock, and I could barely walk and certainly could not sit. Then they gave me what was tantamount to a death sentence: The Germans said that I was too sick and hurt to go to work. Everyone knew that whoever didn't work was sure to be killed.

Two friends from my barracks assured the authorities that I could still work. Discreetly holding me in the middle so that the German guards on the road would not notice, they helped me to walk the eight kilometers to where the rail ties were being laid. I was fortunate in that the German officer on duty that day knew me as a good worker. The Germans, for all their evil, continued to respect hard work. People who demonstrated this quality sometimes received a little better treatment, and in the camps, a little better treatment could mean the difference between life and death, as it did that day. When he saw that I could barely walk, that I could hardly straighten up, this German came over to me and asked what had happened. I told him the entire story, stopping short of showing him my blackened skin. He permitted me to rest on the ground.

"Rest," he said, "today you will not work." Two months later I was fully healed. I was fortunate, very fortunate.

One never knew when a random shot would end a life. One Sunday afternoon, many of us were standing outside naked, waiting to bathe ourselves in the outdoor shower after months without any water for personal use. The SS *Scharführer* (Squad Leader), Miller, who had recently killed a member of Sushastow's *Judenrat* for attempting to obtain his son's release in return for gold and money, came by with his girlfriend. After

watching us and laughing, Miller suddenly took out his gun, and for no reason at all, pointed it at one man's head and pulled the trigger. It was like a man who goes out into the forest to hunt animals just because he has the power to do so. Miller was trying to impress his girlfriend with his power over Jewish life. They laughed and got into his car and drove away to enjoy what remained of their Sunday afternoon. These Germans never forgot to remind us of how worthless our lives were to them.

Yom Kippur of 1942 was spent in Kamionka. Everyone in the barracks fasted, even those Jews who before the German occupation had not observed religious laws. We carefully ate our evening ration before sunset and returned to the barracks to pray *Kol Nidre*, the opening prayer of the Holy Day. We did not worry that the Germans would hear because they were so afraid of lice and typhus in the barracks that they never entered. In the morning, no one lined up for the warm liquid and moldy bread. We did go to work as usual, however. With money that most people had hidden here and there, we were able to bribe one of the German soldiers, who spoke Polish and wasn't a Nazi by ideology, to let us pray. He said that he knew how important Yom Kippur was to the Jews and agreed to turn a blind eye on us as we prayed.

All day long, as thousands of German soldiers passed on the road, we bent over and attacked the road with sledgehammers, shovels, and brooms. During a lull of five or ten minutes between convoys, the group of about 150 of us were led in the prayer service by a fine and educated man who knew a great deal of the service by heart. In this way, we observed the laws of Yom Kippur, fasting and praying, while working on the road. Everyone felt a deep need to pray for redemption. The lines *Who shall live, who shall die* were not abstract phrases for those of us who had witnessed scores of deaths every day.

Minute by minute we lived with the sight, feel, and smell of death. We knew death so well that we were utterly committed to life. We prayed to live, we prayed for deliverance. Even men who did not believe in God or did not think God was paying

attention to our suffering prayed on that Yom Kippur. We were in desperate circumstances, and everyone knew that a miracle was needed to survive. Even though we were being treated as subhuman, we retained our sense of humanity. By asserting ourselves through prayer, we affirmed our dignity.

A few weeks later I came down with typhus and was taken to the infirmary, a small room with six to eight beds, which were no more than slats of wood with a small blanket, lined up one beside the other. With no medicines, no thermometers, and no stethoscopes, the infirmary provided only an opportunity to rest, drink some water, and eat a little extra food. I was not expected to survive. For eight days, I ran an extremely high fever, but I did not succumb. I stayed in the infirmary for almost twelve days. After my fever subsided, the doctors, who were Jews and inmates, told me that if I wanted to live, I would have to return to work, sick or not. Everyone else who had remained in the infirmary this long had been shot. When I got out of bed and stood up, I told the doctor that I saw flecks moving in front of my eyes, like little flies.

He explained, "These 'flies' you are seeing come from your body's weakness. If you go to work now, you won't make it. But if you got enough food, you would get better, and your eyesight would clear up."

He paused and then spoke the words that probably saved my life. "With so many people getting sick, I'll need help. Stay here as my assistant. That way you'll get stronger before returning to the road and working with sledgehammer in the bitter cold." For two and a half months I worked with this doctor and received extra food, and I became healthy once again.

Most people in the infirmary died from typhus, however, and others were shot when the gangrene in their legs and feet was discovered. One day seventeen people with gangrene were taken out and executed. The Germans boasted that it was more efficient to kill a Jew with gangrene than amputate the infected limb. After most of the sick people were killed, there was nothing more that I could do to help the doctor, and as I had

recovered from my illness, I returned to laying railroad ties. I was still weak, however, and the work proved hard for me. I don't know how long I would have lasted with the rail gang. Yet, I was determined to outlast the Nazi beasts, and I worked as hard as I could to avoid drawing attention to myself, resting whenever possible to conserve energy.

Then I had a lucky break. The Jew who had been working for *Hauptsturmführer* Paul Rebel, the SS captain, had run away, and for some reason I was chosen to replace him. By camp standards, this job was wonderful, and everyone coveted the position. All wanted to be the *hauptsturmführer*'s servant. I was glad to have landed the position. Every day I walked two kilometers to the *hauptsturmführer*'s house. Once I had arrived, I would carry about fifteen pails of water from the well, which was a kilometer away, to the house. I chopped a great deal of wood for the fireplaces and stoves, and throughout the day I shined the *hauptsturmführer*'s boots. He had several pairs of high, black boots and was constantly changing from one to another. Each had to be polished to perfection.

This job had many good aspects. First, as the kitchen of the household was staffed by Jews, enough food was available for everyone who worked there. Each evening before I returned to camp, I stuffed my pockets with leftovers to take back for my hungry friends. To smuggle a piece of bread or cheese out of the *hauptsturmführer*'s house and put it into the hands of a fellow Jew meant that I was literally helping the Jew to live a little longer, which could prove long enough for him to survive the war. I was also allowed to wear regular clothing, not an inmate's uniform with a mandatory yellow patch sewn onto the breast, and I could keep my hair at normal length rather than closely cropped like everyone else. Should I decide to run away, these two privileges would increase my chances of blending in with the civilian population. I spoke Polish and Ukrainian. Of course, I didn't forget for a second that the Germans, the SS, and the Ukrainians could kill me at any moment.

Some time after the event, we learned in the camp that during Sukkot of 1942, the SS had planned an *Action* with the intention of making Chorostkow *Judenrein* (Jew-free). The SS discovered my father, uncles, aunts, and cousins hiding in a bunker and herded them onto the transport, which was destined not for Kamionka but rather for Belzec, a death camp about fifty miles outside Lvov. But before the Germans packed every cattle car with about 120 Jews, they had lined the floors in the train with three inches of caustic quicklime, which burns the flesh on contact. Therefore, most of the Jews died before the transport ever arrived in Belzec. Those who managed to survive were shot once the doors of the cattle cars were opened. All the bodies were then burned in the crematoria, and the ashes were buried in the surrounding forest.

The next day, the Germans again came into the ghetto and started killing people, including members of the *Judenrat* council. Like other survivors of the first *Action*, my mother hired a wagon and driver to take her and Arie and some belongings to Trembowla, where her brother, my Uncle Dudio, lived. Chorostkow was, at this point, according to the Nazi's plan, *Judenrein*. All Jews had gone to other ghettos, had run away to the forests and fields, or had been murdered.

Once reunited in Trembowla, my family built an underground bunker beneath the house, knowing that the Nazis would soon stage an *Action* in Trembowla. When the hideout was completed, however, my mother went into it and came right out again. She had already attempted to live in such a bunker in Chorostkow and could not stay inside such a dark cave without light and air.

On April 7, 1943, the Germans entered Trembowla and, together with the Ukrainian police, surrounded the city in preparation for the second *Action*. Arie went into a bunker with about forty or fifty people, and they were never discovered by the Germans. My mother, of blessed memory, refused to go underground, and at fifty-four years of age, would not even consider trying to survive in the forest. So she was rounded up,

along with about 1100 Jews, including my aunts, uncles, and cousins, and marched to Tlebanowka, the hill of death, where they were massacred and thrown directly into the pits that had already been dug for the Jews from the Trembowla ghetto.

My father's death was the first tragic loss for our family. I could neither eat nor sleep. I cried constantly. My father, such a gentle and loving man, was only fifty-four years old. I would work all day on the road, thinking of him and crying. I too joined the *minyan* to say *Kaddish* every morning.

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Monument at Tlebanowka

During the two-kilometer walk I had to take every day to and from the *hauptsturmführer*'s, I often stopped to chat with people to learn as much as I could about the political situation. When I heard about the second *Action* in Trembowla, I grew worried because I knew that my mother and Arie had run away to Trembowla. I made the acquaintance of a Ukrainian man who agreed to send a letter for me to Ivanofka and to allow me to receive return mail at his address. I wrote a letter to Jan Gorniak, a sympathetic Pole who had brought my family flour soon after the start of the German occupation, and I asked him to find out what had happened to my mother and Arie. A few days later I received a reply.

"I saw your brother . . . I know where he is. I don't know where your mother is."

I knew from this last line that my mother had been killed. And so our beloved mother was also gone. I had not even finished saying *Kaddish* for my father when I had to begin praying for my mother. Now only Arie and I were left.

Jan's letter went on in a bold fashion. ". . . . Don't think that as long as you are productive and work you will remain alive. I have heard them say that they will soon liquidate all the Jews, in and out of the camps. Run away at your first opportunity!" But I did not take this advice too seriously. After learning that my mother was also dead, I was determined not to lose more of my family. One morning, I gathered all my nerve and saluted *Hauptsturmführer* Paul Rebel as he was leaving his house.

"*Herr Hauptsturmführer*," I said respectfully in German, knowing I was risking my life. "My mother and father have been killed. All I have left is one brother. You know I'm a good worker. My brother, too, is a good worker. He will do anything you ask of him. Please, *Herr Hauptsturmführer,* I would like my brother to be with me here in Kamionka."

The *hauptsturmführer* could easily have killed me for speaking out so boldly. (A year after I entered the camp, my mother and Arie had tried for a second time to buy my release.)

Much to my relief, he laughed, saying he had never heard of such a thing. "Only a few months earlier you wanted to get out. Now you want your brother to come here?" he said. "I see no reason to object. Go over to the camp secretary. Have him write the papers, and I will sign them."

I went to the secretary, who quickly wrote the necessary letters on SS stationery and then, fearing that something would go wrong and he would be blamed for using SS stationery to make this unusual request, he said, "I think you should get a stamp from the *hauptsturmführer.*" After the *hauptsturmführer* had signed the letter, I asked him to stamp it. He didn't question this request and just stamped the letter and handed it back to me.

But Arie was in Trembowla, fifty-five kilometers away. I went to the Ukrainian farmer who had already helped me with the mail and said to him, "I want to pay you very well. Please go the Trembowla ghetto, find my brother, and give him this letter from the *hauptsturmführer*. Then bring my brother back with you."

He agreed, but only after I had paid him. I also gave him another letter written in Yiddish so that Arie would understand what I had done and why. The farmer found Arie in the ghetto and brought him to Kamionka by horse and wagon. We rejoiced on seeing one another, and mourned our parents' deaths. From then on, we slept together and spent all our time together when we weren't working. I was especially diligent in the house of the *hauptsturmführer*, trying to make sure that nothing would go wrong.

Arie and I often spoke of escape. I was alone on the road each day with every opportunity to flee. My comings and goings were never questioned. I was one of a small number of people who could leave the camp unescorted. From the day that I was promoted to water carrier and wood chopper for the *hauptsturmführer*, the guards had stopped questioning me. The simple reason that we did not try to escape, until the very end, was that we did not want to save our lives at the expense of scores of others. A *landsman* ran away while working on the

road. The next day, *Hauptsturmführer* Rebel ordered everyone into the yard. It was raining and very cold, but we were made to stand there, without moving, from five until seven o'clock in the morning. Then Rebel faced the inmates.

"A man ran away today," he thundered, "You wili all pay the price. You, you, you, and you," the *hauptsturmführer* pointed at four Jews randomly. "Himmel commando, shoot them!" A Ukrainian police officer dragged the men from the line and shot them, right in front of us, with one bullet each to the head. They wanted to frighten us, and they succeeded. "If any of you think of running away, the blood of your fellow Jews will be on your head," the SS officer screamed at us.

In the end, Jews would die if we ran away, and I said to Arie that I would never consider escaping: "I will not have others killed because of my decision." Arie agreed. He too did not want to live with the death of other Jews on his conscience.

On Friday July 9, 1942, as usual I went to work at the *hauptsturmführer*'s house. When I came into his room with a pair of boots, he screamed at me, "Get out! Don't you see that Katzman is here?" Katzman was the notorious SS general in charge of *Aktionen,* liquidations of ghettos and camps in the Lvov region. His reputation as one of the biggest murderers preceded him. I knew that if Katzman had arrived in Kamionka from Lvov, 300 kilometers away, then the Jews were in trouble. I do not whether Rebel was warning me to save myself or if he was simply nervous with such a powerful SS man in the house and wanted me out of the way.

I promptly left and walked back toward camp, stopping first at the houses of the Jewish doctors, telling Doctors Lachman, Reichenberg, and Meibloom what Rebel had said. They all agreed that the end had come, that there would be an *Action* the next day. They told me that everyone would have to escape to save themselves. They asked me to tell Mr. Koltz, the *lagerführer*, as soon as I returned to camp, and warn him of the imminent threat to all Jews there.

I did as I was told. Koltz did not believe me or the doctors, however, saying "The *hauptsturmführer* would never be involved in something like that, and he would certainly tell me if Katzman were a threat. Our work is too important, the German war effort still needs us. The highway to Kiev must be maintained."

I knew that Koltz was from Berlin, and like many German Jews, he was quite gullible. Koltz then told me that I better not cause a panic among the Jews, but I said: "Look Koltz, I'm doing what the doctors told me to do." Just then Itzhak Goldfliess came in. He had just returned from working on the road, where he had been told by a German engineer that an *Action* in which all Jews were to be killed was planned for the following day.

"Mr. Koltz, that means you too," Goldfliess said. "You've got to run away." But Koltz did not believe either of us. He thought that because he had a position of leadership and power, just like the *Judenrat* in the cities and towns, either he would be spared or would be given ample warning of an impending *Action.* We believed the warnings, however, and stopped trying to persuade Koltz.

It soon became obvious that those who could move more freely in and out of the camp had already fled. We knew that the end had come when we heard about the murder of the Jewish leader in Kamionka II for protesting the vicious treatment of inmates during a forced march to Kamionka I. First, we spread word throughout the camp that an *Action* was planned for the following day and that everyone should try to escape. Then when it was dark, we cut a hole in the wire fence, thankfully not electrified as in the large concentration camps, just big enough for a man to crawl under. With the police and soldiers patrolling the front gate, it was easy for us to escape into the corn fields. The corn was high and would provide safe cover, at least for the night.

Of the five thousand Jews in the two camps, only about three hundred escaped, and of these, only thirty-six survived the war. Everyone in Kamionka who chose to escape was able; we were all given sufficient warning, and everyone was told where the hole in the fence was. Many were too sick, weak, or old to get past the fence or would have been unable to survive once outside. Many inmates were just plain afraid. Life on the outside was one of constant fleeing and hiding, always with imminent threat of capture by the Germans and the Ukrainians.

I ran into the corn fields about two hundred yards away, close enough to hear everything and far enough not to be seen. I fell asleep and awakened at four o'clock on *Shabbat* morning, remembering that the Germans always like killing us on our *yomim tovim* (holidays). By the sounds of the SS surrounding the camp, their final liquidation of camp inmates had begun. Right away the Germans began to shoot. They ordered everyone out of the lice-infested barracks, and people were shot as they stepped outside. I wanted to stand to see what was happening. I also wanted to flee. I knew that if I moved, however, they would see the corn moving, and that would have meant the end for me. Some of those who were hiding in the fields stood up and were immediately shot. So I lay there in the high corn, as quietly as I could, moving as little as possible. All day long I prayed to God to save me and to protect Arie, who had also run away.

Group after group of Jews interned at the Kamionka labor camp, thousands altogether, were killed that summer day. Koltz was indeed not killed that day but was taken away to Tarnopol, only to be killed a few weeks later at another *Action.* The Germans and Ukrainians then piled all the dead bodies into a large ditch constructed in the camp and set the bodies on fire. I could feel the heat of the blaze. I could smell the flesh being consumed. Tears ran uncontrollably down my face. My poor *mamale*. My poor *tatale. Am Yisrael* reduced to this. Burnt corpses without graves. I didn't even try to stop the tears, and in spite of them, or because of them, I began to whisper aloud to

myself the Mourner's *Kaddish*. On July 10, 1943, *Zayin b'Tammuz*, Kamionka was completely liquidated.

Arie and I each made our separate ways to Jan Gorniak's farm in Ivanofka, where we met on Tuesday, July 13, and lived together hidden in a hayloft until the Russians liberated the region on March 22, 1944.

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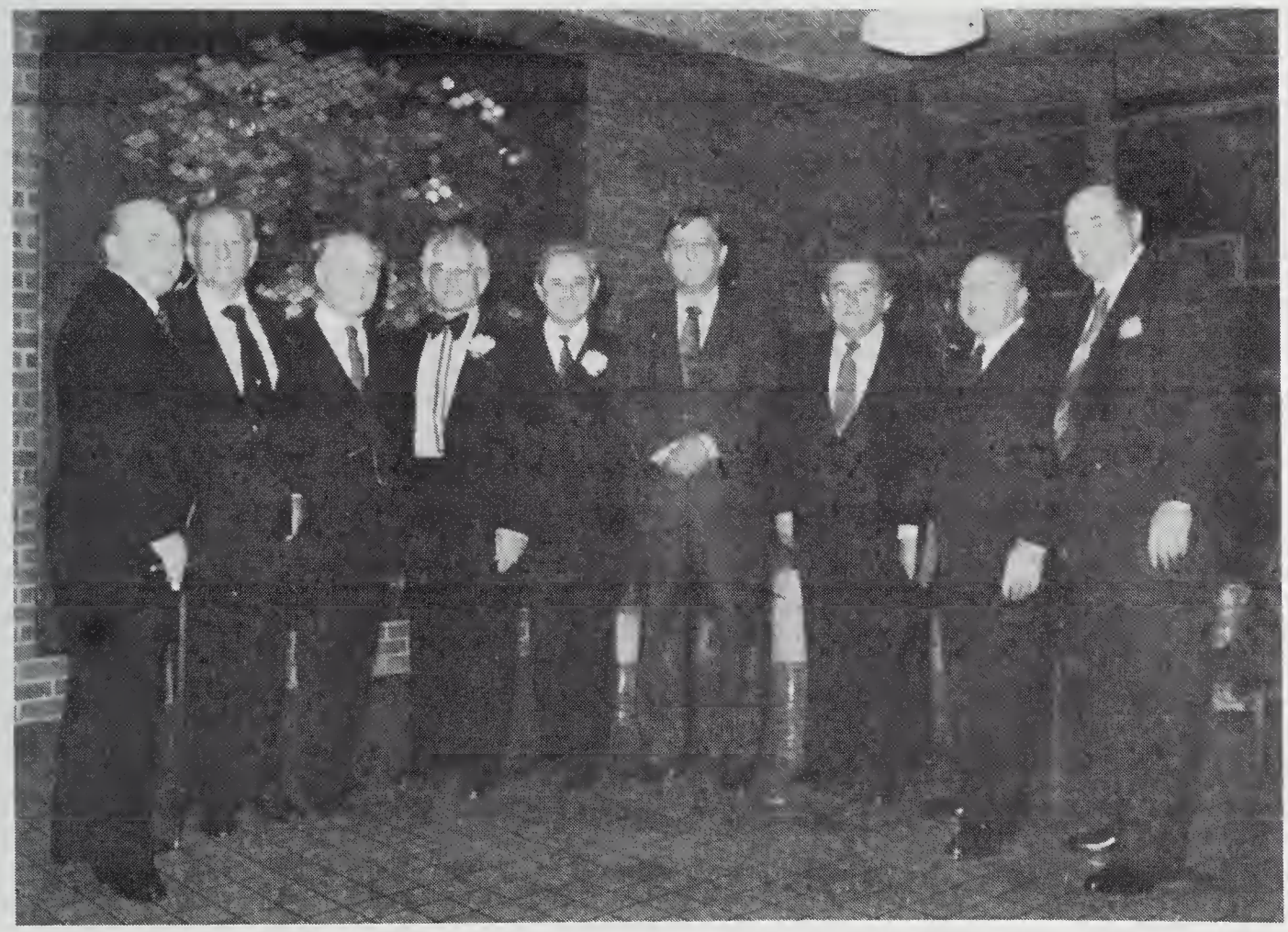
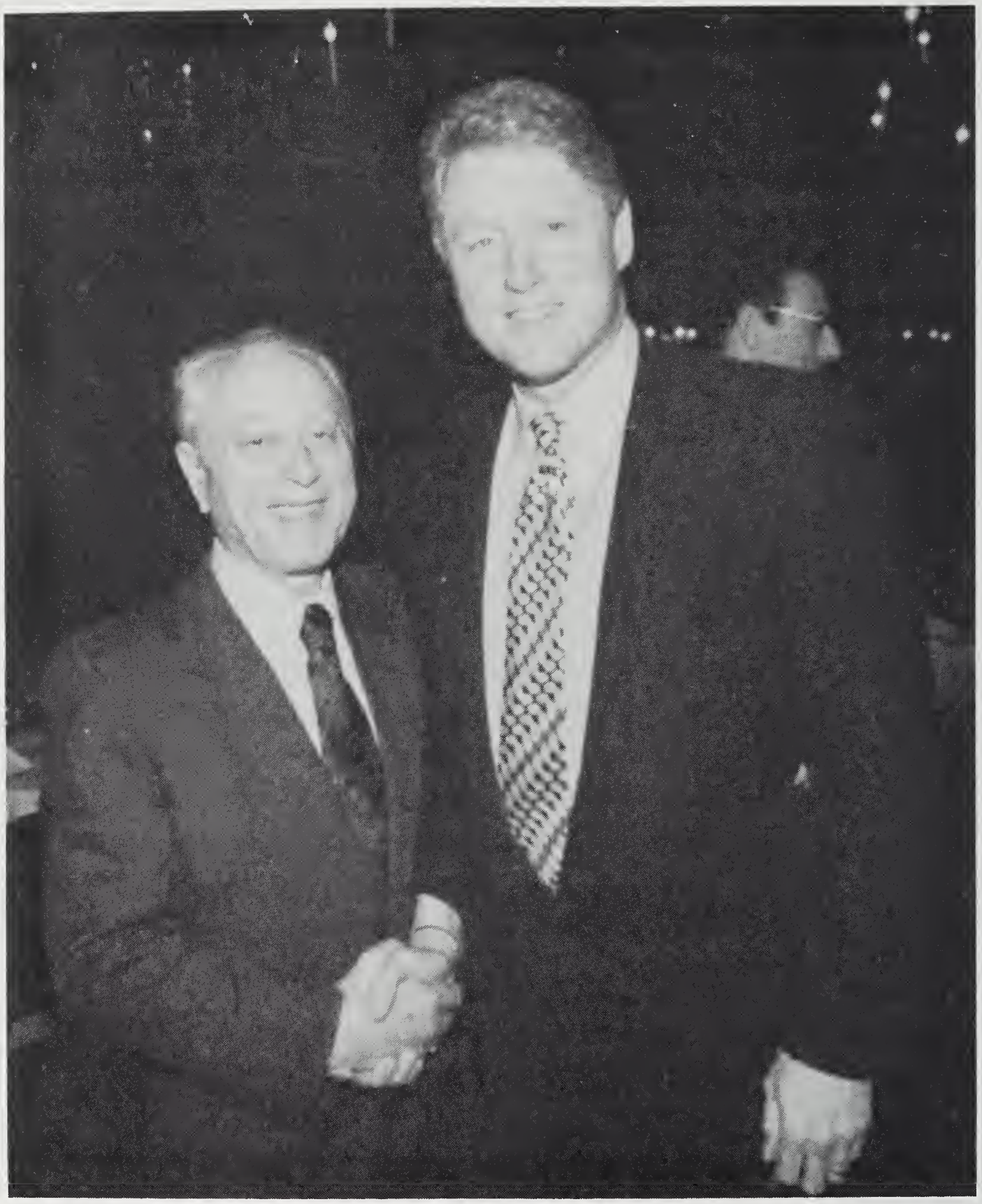


Survivors of Kamionka, left to right: Jack Brennan, Emil Gottlieb, Sam Halpern, Herman Brenman, Eddie Brenman, Ziggy Gottlieb, Isador Halicher, Arie Halpern, and Abus Zaidman



Sam Halpern is greeted by President Bill Clinton at a conference in Washington, DC, in November 1995.

14

I never discussed the holocaust with anyone, not with my family or with anyone else. Yet, now and then, at certain opportunities I did say something, but briefly, by hinting but not elaborating. Indeed, my children know what happened to me. They also know a lot about the holocaust in general, not from me, but from other sources, such as the news media and books. In my family, a third generation of holocaust survivors has already grown up, and therefore, I am writing this biography now to point out and to emphasize to the twelve- to fourteen-year-old children of Israel that in those years, 1942–1944, the years of the German occupation in Europe, hundreds of thousands of Jewish children of their age were exterminated.

And I hope that after reading my book, no one will ever ask the question that has been put to me and to other holocaust survivors since the end of World War II: "Why didn't you resist? Why were you led like lambs to the slaughter?"

I, and all others like me, know the answer, which would not be understood by native-born children of *Eretz Israel* nor those of America nor those of any other free country—and I mean free from Nazi occupation—because only a person who has experienced it is capable of understanding.

Germany, the country that was the cradle of European culture, the German nation, believing in a systematic and thorough approach to any subject, prepared the extermination of the Jewish people in a systematic and thorough manner. They

learned to recognize the vulnerable spots of the Jews and how to exploit them. At first, they established a Jewish Council—the *Judenrat*—in every city and town so that the people would believe that everything was being conducted in an orderly and logical way and would not panic or become anxious. The Nazis also made good use of the division within the Jewish society itself, the forming of different factions. A society that is divided internally cannot unite and organize resistance activities. Especially as the very essence of extermination was kept secret, as much as was possible, and when truth became known, and the people arose to fight for their lives, it was already too late. . . .

The majority had already been annihilated by hunger or disease or murder. Here and there, a few remained to fight. In the ghetto, we were considered no better than bugs that are exterminated by spraying. I often saw the German fondling his dog, caressing and feeding him, whereas I could only envy the dog, my only desire then was to have the privilege of living the life of a dog.

Moreover, the Germans did not carry out the repulsive work themselves, with their own hands. They had faithful helpers, "the Jewish police," all of whom—to the last man—were killed at the end, and all the accursed collaborators like the Ukrainians, the Poles, the Lithuanians, the Croatians, as well as the Bosnians, who as Moslems, were recruited by the Mufti of Jerusalem to assist in exterminating the Jewish people.

The Germans only supervised others and enjoyed seeing them do the work in exchange for a promise not to harm them or their families, or for money, or just because of their hatred of Jews—anti-Semitism.

In those dark days of my orphanhood, of losing my entire family, days of endless fear that my Jewish identity would be exposed and I would be executed by the Germans, I was tired of life and had already reconciled myself with the desire to die, to join all the others.

Actually, what kept me alive and gave me hope to go on living was the news that began to penetrate the fog created by

the Nazis around the real situation on their Russian front. The news—that the German army was retreating from the Red Army—inspired hope in me and gave me the strength to continue, and, yes, I continued and survived. . . .

• • •

Mrs. Poznachowska, Nissan, and I were notified of our transfer date. Poznachowska was considered Polish, and Nissan and I were included in her family form. We started our journey with all the belongings that we were allowed to take with us—all the rest had to be left behind. Selling it was impossible, as everyone knew that the things would become theirs anyway—gratis! We arrived at the railway station and occupied the space that had been allotted to us, in a big warehouse near the train platform.

At that time, Nissan and I did not yet know that, as Jews, we could have registered for emigration to *Eretz Israel*. Mrs. Poznachowska was optimistic during the whole waiting period, which lasted two weeks. She said that, immediately upon arriving in Silesia, we would open a grocery store in which all of us would be partners.

Until then, however, the train still had to come, and we would have to travel to the same Silesian town that was specified in our registration papers. Many people were waiting for the same train, so the big warehouse was filled to capacity with baggage. As we could not leave our things unattended, one of us was constantly there. We ate there, slept there, and did everything there, next to our belongings.

By the way, the food was cold because there was no way to cook. We ate dry bread and some kind of vegetable, or a piece of sausage that Poznachowska had managed to obtain through her deals with the Russian soldiers.

Two weeks later, the expected train arrived—old cars with small windows. The porters began to load the baggage onto it, including the cows, goats, pigs, or poultry belonging to those who had chosen to take animals.

Space for four families was reserved in each passenger car. We started our journey, and all the time Poznachowska was planning our joint grocery store.

"You don't have to commit yourself to anything," she said when she noticed that we were not satisfied with the idea of staying in one place. "You will stay with me and help me until my husband returns from the army, and then I will give you your share of the money, and you will be free to go wherever you like."

The journey lasted one week rather than the forty-eight hours it should have taken in normal times. Russian freight trains hurried north and west to Germany, while trains loaded with all kinds of goods, mainly industrial machines, were on their way back to Russia. We, the passengers of civilian trains, were forced to park on a side track and wait. In short, we experienced a difficult, exhausting week, but I was already used to a hard life. Even though I occasionally felt somewhat depressed from fatigue, I revived myself by the thought that I was witnessing a tremendous process—the Russians are plundering the Germans, taking back what the Nazis had robbed from the residents of the occupied countries in general, and from the Jews in particular.

I was watching revenge, and what a sweet revenge it was! Especially as most of the trains that the Russians had confiscated from the Germans still displayed the Nazi symbol. In those trains, I told myself, the Nazis had transported thousands of Jews to be exterminated. . . .

On one train a message appeared in German: 'We are on our way to Poland to exterminate the Jews. Heil Hitler!' Because nobody knew, in all probability, exactly what the message said, it remained.

Obviously this inscription had been written in the first days of the war. Unfortunately, the victory over the German devil had come too late for the Jewish people. When that train stopped for about ten minutes just beside ours, I explained to Poznachowska what the inscription meant. She spat three times,

made the sign of the cross, and murmured: "I was always angry at the Russians because they took my husband, but I forgive them now because they defeated Satan, and I am glad that they gave my husband the opportunity to take an active part in it."

She was a great woman, a truly righteous human being. She had suffered terribly after the Russians took her husband, and yet! Had all Gentile women been like her, or if not all at least most of them, the Nazis would not have succeeded in killing millions of Jews!!!

After traveling for a week, we arrived in Breslau, Silesia—a very big city, although half destroyed by the war. For a long time the city had been besieged and had, of course, suffered from air bombing and ground shelling from both sides. The city was crossed by the Oder, a wide and deep river. While Nissan and I stayed with the children on the river bank, Mrs. Poznachowska went to the municipality to get an apartment.

She returned from the municipality with a permit to occupy an apartment in a small town called Strehlen, about twelve miles from Breslau. Before we moved into the new apartment, Poznachowska's husband, Mikhail, returned from the army and was reunited with his family. He found her easily because her name and new address were on the list of the Polish emigrants.

Mikhail Poznachowski was glad to see Nissan and me. He had known both of us before the German occupation. He thanked us for helping his wife, who had been encumbered with two small children.

In Strehlen, they were accommodated in a three-story building. The first two floors were empty, and a German family, who had already packed their belongings, was still living on the third floor. They had been ordered to vacate and emigrate to East Germany, and two months later they left. The entire twelve-room house, in addition to a downstairs shop and a storeroom, became ours.

First we started to renovate the store, and then Mikhail and I went to Breslau to buy merchandise. You couldn't get

anything in Strehlen because it had been half destroyed during the war. We had to bring everything from Breslau. For about two months, Nissan and I worked in the store, which mainly involved trips to purchase goods in Breslau.

On one of our trips, I met a Jew named Inliger and his twenty-two year-old son, who was formerly from our town and now living in Breslau. From him I heard for the first time about Jewish *shlichim* (emissaries) who had come to Breslau from *Eretz Israel* to assemble the Jewish holocaust survivors, those who had fled to Russia then and were now returning as Polish citizens. The emissaries represented different political parties—at that time I didn't know what a party was—Mapai, Poalei Zion, and Agudath Israel, a religious party. Many thousands of Jews had escaped from Poland to Russia, where they had been inducted into the Polish Army that had been established within the framework of the Red Army, and thereby saved their lives.

"One day," Inliger said, "All of them will be transferred to *Eretz Israel*, that is, Palestine."

"Why not immediately?" I asked because the name *Eretz Israel* fascinated me, and I was not an expert on all the British politics there.

"We must wait, things are not that simple," Inliger answered. "but we must be ready to sail to Israel and not become dispersed."

He asked me whether I would be ready to go to *Eretz Israel*, and I immediately replied in the affirmative. But first, however, I would have to consult with somebody. I told him about Nissan, and when I returned home, I told the Poznachowski couple.

Besides being a good woman, Mrs. Poznachowska was also clever. She heard the story, thought for a while, and finally said:

"Important and interesting. If they are really assembling all the Jews, in Palestine, to establish a state of their own, then you must go there. But don't make any hasty decisions. Examine the facts thoroughly and only then decide."

Nissan and I took the train to Breslau and met with Inliger. He told us where the Jews were assembling for their journey to *Eretz Israel*.

Something didn't sound right to me, and I asked Inliger about it.

"You are sending others away, while you yourself remain here!" I said. "What attracts you in such a Poland, which today is no more than a big cemetery of the Jewish people?"

His excuse was that he had a business in cooperation with a Catholic Pole, and that, after he sells his share to another Pole, he will go to *Eretz Israel*.

"My son and I don't have to be at the assembly place," he said. "The *shlichim* know where to find us when necessary."

It turned out that this was the procedure for all Jews living permanently in Breslau. Only the Jewish young people and orphans were gathered in such camps. Nissan and I went there and registered. Everyone there spoke Yiddish, even the *shlichim* from *Eretz Israel*. We told them we would be back in a few days.

Mrs. Poznachowska was glad but also sorry to hear that we had registered with those desiring to go to *Eretz Israel*. She was glad that the Jews were beginning to get together again and were organizing themselves after the holocaust, but she was sorry because she had become used to us and we were working together in harmony.

"Well," her husband intervened, "I too would like you to stay with us, but somehow I believe that if you assemble in Palestine, a Jewish state will be established there, and you should be there then."

Despite the saying that, in our times, only fools are engaged in prophecy, this is not always true. As it turned out later, Mikhail Poznachowski's prophecy came true.

The parting from this wonderful Polish couple was difficult. She bought us clothes and shoes, and we changed our Polish money for dollars on the black market.

15

When we reached the assembly hall, we were cared for by the *shlichim* and the adults who were holocaust survivors. We received free food and lodging! A large group of young people had gathered there, many of them around the age of twelve.

We had three instructors from *Eretz Israel* and three local ones who had been trained quickly by instructors who were among the *shlichim* from Israel. Everything was very well organized, with a daily agenda that was strictly followed. The place also had a prayer hall and everyone, almost without exception, came to pray there, even those who were not religious. In the Diaspora, in towns and in small places, it was customary for everyone to go to the prayers. It was part of the social life.

I had not had any connection with religion in the last few years, but nevertheless I joined the *Gordonia* youth group. I joined the prayers because I came from a religious family and wished to honor the memory of my parents.

Everyone there spoke Yiddish, except for a handful of intellectuals, who even after the lesson they had learned from the Nazis, still tried to assimilate with the Gentiles and spoke in their language, Polish. It turned out that the assembly area was temporary. We were transferred to other locations, and I was moved to a *Gordonia* youth group in the town of Nemche, some 25 miles from Breslau.

The new place was some kind of a small *Eretz Israel*. The house was surrounded by a large yard. Every morning began with a morning parade, hoisting the national flag—blue and white with the Star of David—and singing *Hatikvah*. Singing *Hatikvah*, our national anthem, was new to me. The national anthem was sung in Hebrew, and a huge wave of warmth encompassed me when I learned the meaning of the words. "To be a free nation in our own country, the land of Zion and Jerusalem!"

Our instructors saw to it that we were busy all the time. Everyone studied Hebrew—speaking, reading, and writing—and the younger children were also taught various school subjects that they had missed during the Nazi occupation.

The evenings were also full of activity. A choir was begun, and a theater and various classes were established. An orchestra for harmonica and mandolin orchestra was organized. The tunes we used to play were from *Eretz Israel*, and we learned them from our *Eretz-Israeli* instructors. The strange thing was that most of the tunes were Russian melodies that had been translated into Hebrew. The camp manager was a youth from *Eretz Israel,* and his deputy was a local man who had served as an artillery officer in the Red Army. In 1948 he arrived in Israel and became an artillery instructor in the Israel Defense Forces.

One day, without prior warning, we were told to pack our belongings because we were going to move within a few hours. Whereto? They did not tell us. Top secret! When the time came, we were provided with food for one day and loaded onto trucks.

The trucks belonged to the Red Army and the drivers were soldiers. Everything was secret and mysterious. What did we have to do with the Red Army? Where are they taking us? We knew nothing and understood nothing, and our instructors were not willing to explain. The instructors—*shlichim* from *Eretz Israel*—were particularly secretive. One of them, a young man in his early twenties, answered my mandatory question

about our destination with a smile and a wink: "To *Eretz Israel.*"

"With trucks of the Red Army?" asked someone who had overheard. "How's that?"

The instructor lifted his eyes toward the sky and said: "So *He* wishes, the one who sits in heaven."

In short, during the night we crossed the Czechoslovakian border. An illegal passage with the aid of the Russian army, who had arranged it. Incidentally, Red Army signs were on the trucks, the drivers wore uniforms of the Red Army, but I do not remember hearing a single word of Russian from them . . . not even from the drivers of the trucks that we were transferred to on the other side of the border . . . in fact, we never heard anyone utter a word. . . .

Having crossed the Czech border, we continued to travel for several hours until we reached a Jewish refugee camp near Brno, the second-largest city in Czechoslovakia. The camp was full of barracks and looked just like a military camp. We received beds, bedding, and mattresses. We ate in a large dining hall, which was clean and orderly. It was obvious that the "Joint" (the American Joint Distribution Committee) was directing all this. Once everyone received a package from America with cigarettes, liqueurs, chocolates, cans of kosher meat, dried fruit, and other miscellaneous small items—small items to those who had sent them, those who had not felt any shortages, but grand and important things to us, the holocaust survivors.

We stayed in Czechoslovakia for about two months. Once I went into the city of Brno, which was about four miles from the camp. A beautiful city, which had been severely damaged by the war, but its wonderful historical buildings had been damaged in a way that could readily be repaired to restore them to their original condition. What struck me was that, as a result of the war, the stores were empty. I had money, but there was nothing to buy. . . .

The city was swarming with Russian soldiers and policemen, and like in Poland, they asked you to present your identification documents wherever you turned. I was not required to carry any documents, however, because I was too young, but I saw civilians holding their identity cards in their hands and presenting them to policemen even before they were asked to do so.

Actually, despite the difficulties it caused the citizens, I did not condemn this practice. True, the Communist regime was severe and strict, but an individual could live comfortably if he accepted the system and became integrated into it. The first rule to follow under the Communist regime was to hold one's tongue. As the Jewish saying goes: "Life and death are in the power of the tongue." No matter what they say about the Communists, I will never forget that their Red Army saved me and thousands of other Jews from extermination.

True, the Red Army did not fight to save Jews; the Russians were not interested in the Jews. Were it for the degrading agreement between Molotov and Ribbentrop, that is, between the German Nazi government and the Russian Communist regime, who knows whether the Germans would have dared to invade the Soviet Union and overpower the millions of Jews there in such a threatening way . . . .

But, enough with these political speculations, let us return to the facts.

The facts are that the Red Army fought to destroy and drive out the German fascists who had invaded their country, Russia, and while pursuing the retreating German army, it liberated peoples and countries and also the Jews, who happened to be among them.

The Red Army also included Ukrainian units and the Polish Army corps. These units, for the most part, had beaten Jews, especially Ukrainian and Polish civilians who, among others, supported the Nazis, as I have already mentioned before.

We must not forget that many Jews escaped from the ghettos into the huge, thick forests of Poland and the Ukraine to

fight the Germans as partisans, and then the Gentile partisan units not only refrained from helping the Jews but also fought against them, as if the Jews were the enemy and not the Nazis.

I cannot forget an incident that took place while we still lived in the ghetto, before its final liquidation. While I was walking in the streets of the town one day, I met a Ukrainian boy who had studied with me in school before the German occupation. Seeing me, he exclaimed with astonishment and open disappointment:

"What? Are you still alive? Didn't they kill you yet?"

I didn't answer him. I was so astonished by that 'welcome' greeting. When I turned to continue on my way, the little ruffian added: "Hey, your shirt looks new!"

He was right. It was a new shirt that I had forgotten about and had recently found among the boxes in the closet.

"So what?" I answered while looking at his dirty and torn shirt with contempt.

"Let's make an exchange," said the *sheigetz*. "Take mine and give me yours. Anyway they will kill you today or tomorrow. It would be a shame to lose such a pretty shirt."

The behavior of that contemptible *sheigetz* is a typical example of the attitude of the Gentile population—and again I state, not all but most—toward the Jew, who was the persecuted and the exterminated.

The Czechs, who were working in the refugee camp near Brno, were very friendly. They showed sympathy toward the Jewish refugees. Even the Czechs that I met occasionally in the city itself were very cordial and sympathetic to the Jews who had been victims of the Nazis. And that, to a large extent, was because they too had been victims of Nazi Germany. . . .

The Czechs hated the Germans so much that we were careful not to speak Yiddish in their presence, because Yiddish resembles German, and they couldn't stand even the sound of the language. So, when Czechs were present, we spoke Polish, which has some resemblance to the Czech language.

In the camp, the children were completely separated from the adults, mainly because most children were orphans, except for those whose parents had fled to Russia and had come back alive. But these children were put with the orphans too so that they could get the same education and treatment.

From Czechoslovakia we went to Salzburg in Austria, a beautiful but medium-sized city. Mozart was born there. This journey was similar to that from Poland to Czechoslovakia. We traveled at night on Red Army trucks. In Salzburg we stayed in a high-rise building, which was full of Jewish refugees. You could see many names and addresses on the bulletin board, relatives announcing their existence and looking for contacts.

As I found out later, this would be our last stop before going to Italy and sailing to *Eretz Israel*. In Austria, by chance, Nissan found an uncle who took him to his home—this was called reunion of families!

Here too, in Austria, we lived without any anxieties. As refugees we received food and lodging, and what else does a human being need, especially those like us, who had suffered so much and had constantly faced death during the Nazi occupation? All that we needed in the meantime was to fill our stomachs and to have a roof over our heads. . . .

At that time I was still intoxicated with the sensation of freedom, overwhelmed and confused by the realization that I was still alive and that the dangers of hunger and death were not hanging over me any more. As much as possible, I thought neither of the past nor of the future! I believed that those who were caring for me now—twenty-four hours a day—would also take care of my future!

Despite the Nazi extermination plan, despite their attempts to liquidate the Jewish people, the people of Israel lived! Beaten, with one third of its members killed, but alive! And I am a part of that nation.

Here too, in Salzburg, I went with two other boys into the city. And like in Brno, we had money, but there was nothing to buy. The stores were empty. The population received rationed

food from the occupation authorities. The American army was already here in Austria, and we met American soldiers for the first time. Healthy young men, clean and happy all the time. They lacked nothing! On the contrary, they even supplied others!

Austria had been divided into control zones. We were in the American zone. The Russians, the British, and the French controlled other zones.

As the stores had nothing to sell, we entered a barber shop and got a haircut at a very low price. At that time I had long blond hair, and my two friends also had nice, not especially dark, hair. The barber suggested that we curl our hair, which was not expensive, and we agreed. I left the barber's shop with a primped, curly hairdo, which was nice perhaps, but I didn't like it. What am I, a girl? I did everything I could to straighten my hair, wetting it from time to time and combing it straight back.

From Austria we went to Italy, but that's another story.

16

On a harsh wintry, snow-covered evening, we began our journey on a truck. We traveled for several hours, delayed by the snow and the war-damaged roads, until we reached a place near the Italian border. Evidently our instructors had come to the conclusion that we wouldn't be able to cross the border at night, especially as the crossing would have to be made on a dark winter night in the snow-covered Alp terrain. Even in daytime and under favorable weather conditions, this border was difficult to cross.

As it was already late, we returned to our starting point. We had to wait that night and another two days to begin the next attempt. This time we were told to take only what we could carry with us.

"What about all our belongings?" we asked the instructor who had given us the directions.

"Forget about them," he answered. "Life is more important. As for things, you can buy new things later."

He explained that we would have to cross the Alps in the dark and along difficult paths. The crossing was illegal. Actually we were escaping across the border, he continued to explain, and if were exposed and caught, we would be thrown into prison, and who knows when such an opportunity would come along again in the future.

I didn't have many things. Some clothes and a change of underwear, shaving accessories, and several additional small items that I had packed neatly into my rucksack. By contrast,

some had full suitcases, and they had to decide what to take with them and what to leave behind. Deciding to leave something behind was difficult, especially for the adults, who had started to collect things after the liberation.

So we boarded the trucks. Adults and youths, but not children under the age of twelve. We started out early, and when it became dark we reached the point where we had to begin walking. We had heard that the walking time was supposed to be five hours!

We had four guides, two from *Eretz Israel*, who were called 'escape workers'. Because some were stumbling and advancing slowly, we walked almost all night. The stronger ones had to slow down, because we could not leave anyone behind, and the pace had to match that of the weak, the stumbling. In particular, problems arose with the women who had brought along lots of luggage. For a woman, deciding what to throw away is difficult, and thus they took with them a lot more than they could carry.

I remember that on the way, one woman, about 40 years old, addressed me with a smile and a wink:

"Listen here, you look handsome and healthy to me. Take my sweater. It will keep you warm."

I was warm anyway and did not need her sweater. Because of my exhaustion and hunger—yes, the effort was great and the evening meal we had been given, with only wafers and a drink, was not enough for me—I was irritated and spoke accordingly.

"I am hot without your sweater! You want me to carry it for you? Throw it away for God's sake!"

She looked at me angrily, as if I owed her something, and tried to look for another 'porter', but everyone refused, and finally she buried the sweater in the snow, because the instructors had warned us not to leave any traces along the terrain. If you wanted to get rid of something, you had to bury it in the snow.

It was night, and we slowly adapted ourselves to the dark. We followed a mountainous Alp path in deep snow and along steep and dangerous slopes. It was easy to go astray, but we could trust our instructors from *Eretz Israel* who had walked this path many times and knew it well. The walking was conducted in military order. An instructor walked at the end of the line to make sure that nobody remained behind. In addition, a count was made from time to time.

There were 80 of us. On the way we made short, five-minute stops. The five minutes were not enough, of course, but our time was limited because we had to be at the designated location in Italy before daylight. In addition, sitting still in one place at about 18–20 degrees Fahrenheit, in a freezing wind that was blowing mercilessly, was difficult.

I was young and healthy and used to hardship, so the walking did not particularly affect me. I even helped adults for whom walking was difficult, especially a woman who stumbled all the way. But the important thing was that we reached our destination in Italy safely and before daylight.

We were taken to a large straw-filled shed that had once been a granary. We were instructed to wait there until morning in the severe cold, which we had not felt so much while walking but which was quite unpleasant when resting in one place, without moving. And in addition to that discomfort, to avoid making any noise that might attract attention, we were ordered to keep quiet and not to move. We were still near the Italian border and ran the risk that if exposed, we would be imprisoned or deported back across the border.

Early in the morning we were pushed into tarpaulin-covered trucks, where we had to stand up all the way. Hence we were covered and concealed from all sides, even from the 'evil eye', but not from the harsh cold and the nagging wind that could still enter from every hole and slit in the canvas.

We traveled for several hours through northern Italy, where the winter is particularly cold. We were told that we were on our way to a railway station, where we would board a train.

But we must remember that it would be an ordinary civilian train, so if we were asked questions by inquisitive Italian passengers, we should just gesticulate—even if, by chance, we did understand—that we do not understand the language. We reached the railway station and boarded three cars in which Italian passengers were already seated. Two instructors also boarded each car, sitting separately as though they had no connection to us.

Indeed, our strange clothes definitely attracted attention, and one Italian addressed me with a question. The truth is that I did not understand a word of what he was saying, so without pretense and with honesty I made signs indicating such. He left me alone. This happened to the others as well.

A few hours later we arrived in Milan, a large city in Northern Italy, the second largest city in Italy in fact. Milan is famous throughout the world for the La Scala opera. In Milan the Joint had rented a big building for the Jewish refugees that served mainly as a "transit camp." The building contained many rooms and a large dining hall, and each bedroom had eight beds. We were assigned beds and told to come to the dining hall.

In those days, there was an enormous bread shortage in Italy, but our tables abounded with baskets of fresh white rolls. The smell of fresh bakery goods was exciting, and we could eat as much as we liked. This especially stimulated our appetite because we had come from Austria where bread was rationed. In Austria, our lunch had been just two slices of bread per person and nothing else!

And here, the bread was free and not just bread, but hot fresh rolls. Naturally we grabbed the rolls and ate our fill of them, and even more. Fearing that such abundance would end, we took some rolls with us for later. But that behavior continued for only a few days until we learned that there would be no shortage of rolls, so we stopped gorging on them and also stopped hoarding them.

The green olives on our table presented a small problem. Green olives of the giant variety were simply unfamiliar to us.

At least to most of us. We didn't know what they were and how they should be eaten. They had a distinct and strange taste. As youngsters—who were actually still children because the true, natural years of childhood had been lost in the holocaust, when we had suddenly become adults, and now we had become children again and discovered a game—we started to play with the olives. We began throwing the olives at each other, completely overlooking the fact that hitting somebody in the head with such a big olive could cause serious pain. When the kitchen staff saw what we were doing, they stopped serving us olives. Anyone who wanted to eat olives, however, and some of us did, could get them from the kitchen.

We had more spare time than we had expected, so we played a lot of games in the big yard, mainly soccer, volleyball, and baseball. In addition to these outdoor activities, we also spent a lot of time in the school classes. The instructors taught us mostly Zionism and information about the country—*Eretz Israel*, of course—which fascinated us.

One day we were told that the age group of twelve to sixteen year-olds was leaving this place, which was a 'transit camp', as I already mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, and traveling to Salvino, Italy.

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Salvino

Salvino is situated near Milan. The institution is well known in Israel. It was managed by a military man, Moshe Zeiri, who was a member of the Schiller Group in Israel. The 'Salvino children' hold reunions from time to time. Of the three 'graduating classes' of Salvino children, I belonged to the second. The institution housed children—mainly orphans aged from three years old and up—who were holocaust survivors from Poland, Hungary, and others.

The small children, who had been infants during the Nazi occupation, had been hidden by their parents in Catholic monasteries. Then, after the German defeat, they had been taken out of the monasteries and united with the other children that were housed in Salvino, a rich mountain resort village about 20 miles from Bergamo, which lies in the Po valley of Northern Italy around 30 miles from Milan.

Actually, nobody knew the real names of many children. In the monasteries they had been given Christian names without leaving any written record of their previous names because this practice made it more difficult for the Nazis, who searched for such children so that they could kill them, in line with their policy of completely exterminating the Jewish people. When we arrived at Salvino, our group already consisted of about fifty boys and girls who had survived the holocaust. Some had survived death camps, others had managed to hide with

Christian families or had been kept in monasteries, and some children had lived in the Soviet Union with their parents, and now the parents had returned to Poland, while their children were sent to join us.

Although the resort village was situated only about 20 miles from Bergamo, a bus trip to Bergamo took some three hours because the journey was a long steady climb on a high ridge in the Alps. The road was serpentine, and the bus had to strain to keep moving forward. We frequently traveled in circles, so it seemed to us that we didn't make any progress at all, as though we were turning around in one spot. We the youngsters, and especially the children, were afraid to look down. The abyss on the sides of the road was terrifying.

At the summit we finally reached an Italian village, where it seemed that we were sitting above the clouds, that the rain did not fall on us but rather from us and onto locations below. This was a small Italian village whose income was from sheep breeding, grapes, wine, and tourism. At the outskirts of the village stood several oblong, three- or even four-story buildings. The buildings contained, among other things, heated swimming pools, cinemas and sports halls, dining halls, and bedrooms, as well as a modern hospital and a clinic. In short, a resort village for the elite of the Fascist regime and for the richest families in Italy.

The Jewish organizations, the Jewish Agency and the *Joint*, had leased this village to rehabilitate the children who had survived the holocaust and to prepare them for transport to *Eretz Israel*.

Under the leadership of Jewish military men from *Eretz Israel*, who were serving within the framework of the British army, the place was soon transformed into a miniature *Eretz Israel*. Jewish children, including many who did not know until recently that they were Jews, children who had hidden for weeks and months in the Polish forests, hungry and freezing, to whom any rustle of trees in the forest seemed to them like the whisper of the Angel of Death; children who had been forced to escape

with their parents to the Soviet Union to freeze in Siberia; and especially those who did not know one letter of Hebrew, gradually began to speak and make noise in Hebrew and to sing songs that children of the same age were singing in *Eretz Israel*.

Some three-hundred boys and girls were already staying in this resort village when our group arrived. A few young men and women, aged twenty-five to thirty, were staying there too. We did all the camp work and services without the need for outside workers: cleaning up, serving meals—the chief cook was a salaried Italian, but the kitchen workers were camp residents. The maintenance of the buildings and the yard, in short, everything, was done by us, guided by our instructors, according to a predetermined work schedule that was posted on the notice board.

We had a soccer field, narrow but with two goals, and we could play there. Facilities for other ball games were there as well, with seats for spectators.

We also put in service at the infirmary, which was run by two Jewish doctors. The camp gate was closed at nightfall, and the camp was guarded day and night. To adapt us to the conditions of *Eretz Israel*, not only the boys were put on guard duty. We guarded in pairs, a boy and a girl. I had to stand guard once a month.

Besides lectures on Zionism and information about *Eretz Israel*, we also studied Hebrew, bible, math, geography, drawing, handicraft, and other things with teachers from *Eretz Israel*. The camp supervisors did their best to make up for the education that had been denied us under the Nazi occupation.

Moshe Zeiri, the manager of the institution, offered the boys and girls who were over fourteen the opportunity of learning a profession out of a list of various simple occupations, such as carpentry, machine shop, and tailoring, which was offered mainly to girls.

I chose carpentry, but I did not keep on with it for a reason that I still don't understand myself. Instead of learning a profession, I chose to do general jobs that were closer to what I

had done in the village of Malinisky when I was pretending to be a Gentile child. I did all sorts of unskilled labor, no matter what. Cleaning, dishwashing in the kitchen, sawing wood for heating, which was done with an electric saw.

Nevertheless, with all my satisfaction with the living conditions and my work, I felt that something was missing. I was not content. In those days, I could not explain to myself what I was lacking, but now I know. I was lacking the warmth of a home, a family. I longed for my mother, my father, my brother Moshe, and my little sister Zippora. I longed for my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, and my nephews and nieces. Before the Germans came, we were a big, loving Jewish family, and now I was left by myself. All had been destroyed. Of my entire laboring and warm Jewish family, only I remained!

I believe this was the reason why I stopped learning carpentry. It wasn't enough to occupy my mind. It left me with a lot of time for meditation and memories, which depressed me, whereas the various odd jobs that I was doing diverted my mind from other things.

Here, in this camp, you could meet Jewish youngsters from Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and others who did not know your language and you did not know theirs. One day the Hebrew language we were studying would become the language for communication. Meanwhile, I could talk only with Polish children, all of whom spoke Yiddish, although in different dialects. In Warsaw Yiddish had been spoken in a dialect that was different from that spoken in Lithuania, but we could easily understand one another. I spoke Galician Yiddish, which differed from that spoken in other places, but as I said this was not a problem. The finest and most cultured Yiddish was spoken by the Lithuanian Jews. Moshe Zeiri spoke this kind of Yiddish, which was pleasant to listen to. Because the Lithuanian boys laughed at my Galician Yiddish, I spoke with them in Russian, which they knew because Lithuania had been occupied by the Russians for two years, and they had been forced to study Russian at school.

Not all the children were holocaust survivors. Some of them had spent the wartime in Russia after fleeing there from Poland with their parents. Talking with them about my experiences during the holocaust was difficult. They simply didn't understand me. True, some of them were orphans, but their parents had perished in Russia from hunger, from cold, and from various diseases, or had fallen in the war while serving in the Red Army, but not as a result of German extermination actions. It was easy to talk to them because they spoke Russian, although they hardly knew any Yiddish. As the Lithuanian Yiddish is the nicest, I finally adopted it. People stopped laughing at my Yiddish.

Moshe Zeiri formed and directed a choir. He had a musical talent. The songs that he taught us and we sang were clearly songs from *Eretz Israel* in Hebrew. We also learned Jewish holiday songs, also in Hebrew, but we did not understand everything.

In the course of time, a Romanian youth named Gary Bertini, who had come from Russia, joined us. Now he is a well-known Israeli conductor and an internationally recognized musician. He excelled in playing the accordion and we considered him a virtuoso. Moshe Zeiri included him in the choir, where he contributed a lot, especially after becoming our conductor.

We also had a dramatic circle that staged the play *The Book of Ruth*. I participated, but I don't remember which character I played.

One day I met a boy who regularly received letters and parcels from America. I happened to notice the address *Detroit, Michigan* on the envelope of a letter he was writing. It reminded me that my uncle, my father's brother, lived in Detroit, Michigan. In Galicia his name had been Mordechai, but in America he changed his name to Marcus. I didn't know my uncle's address in Detroit, but I asked the boy to ask his family to try to find out about my uncle, and he agreed willingly.

In the next letter that he received from Detroit, it turned out that this boy's uncle knew my uncle very well, and they even prayed in the same synagogue. Moreover, a letter from my uncle was in the same envelope. The letter was written in Polish, and my uncle's address was written there too.

Though I knew Polish, I did not like the language and I preferred to correspond either in Russian or in Yiddish. At first I debated with myself about what language to write in. I could not imagine that my father's brother, who was a Jewish scholar and a cantor in the synagogue, would not know Yiddish. Besides, I remembered that I had once seen my father writing to him in Yiddish.

By the way, just for the record, my uncle emigrated from Galicia to America even before World War I, and in his short letter he told me that he had raised a family in America and has four children.

Well, I wrote to him a detailed three-page letter in Yiddish. I conveyed to him the very bad news that, except for me, nobody in the family had survived. The accursed Nazis had exterminated all of them, and only I had successfully evaded them. And how unfortunate that my parents had not managed to send my brother, Moshe, to him in America before the war began.

In his next letter, my uncle apologized for having written to me in Polish. It had not occurred to him that a young boy like me would know how to read and write Yiddish. And what a Yiddish! He had never read such a fine Yiddish. He meant, of course, the Lithuanian Yiddish that I had used for writing my letter.

He wrote that two of his sons, David and Benjamin, had served in the U.S. army and had fought the Nazis. One of his sons, David, served in the regular army and was now with the occupation forces in Germany, living there with his wife and two children. My uncle sent me twenty-five dollars. Naturally I did not spend the money only on myself. The boys and girls my age who belonged to my group joined me in squandering the

money. We were organized in the camp according to age groups. Today I don't recall the name of our group.

I kept receiving letters and parcels and shared everything with the others in my group. Some of them had parents in other places in Italy, and when they received something from them, they too behaved according to the group custom—everything was shared.

Among other things, my uncle also wrote that he would like to bring me to live with him in America, but before approaching the appropriate authorities in the U.S.A., he would like to have my consent. For this purpose, he would have to receive a permit from the American immigration authority and undertake to support me so that I will not become a burden on the government of the United States.

Well, that was that! The United States of America demands a guarantee that a Jewish child, whose entire family was exterminated by the Nazis, and he himself only survived after much suffering and hardship and a daily struggle against death, will not become a burden on the USA.

No! Thank you! I am going to *Eretz Israel* to build my country and my nation there, never again to become a 'burden' on others. And so it turns out, I kept telling myself, that the principles pounded into us here by our instructors from *Eretz Israel* have penetrated into my heart and my head!

Such was the spirit of my reply to my uncle as well, and I even suggested to him that he should leave the Diaspora, which has caused only evil for the Jews. Hitler, and before him Petlyura, the Ukrainian enemy in 1919, and long before him Chmelnicki—another Ukrainian oppressor. And then the expulsion from Spain that my instructor had spoken about in a lesson on Zionism, and all the Hamans and Amalekites who had risen against us to exterminate us, and why?

Let me cite only what we read in the Book of Esther, Haman's argument that "There is one nation dispersed and fragmented among the peoples . . ."

Dispersed and fragmented, without a state of its own, with no center of its own!

As long as we shall remain like this, all kinds of Hamans will rise against us to destroy us. Therefore, I am going to *Eretz Israel* to establish my state there. The year was 1947, and from what we had heard from our *Eretz-Israeli* instructors, people were talking seriously about establishing a Jewish state in the near future.

With these and similar arguments I tried to persuade my uncle to immigrate to *Eretz Israel*. To the land of Israel, "there you will be able to return to the name that your father, my grandfather of blessed memory, gave you at your *brith* ceremony," I wrote him, "and you will not need the name 'Marcus' any more."

But all this was to no avail. He did not even want to hear about *Eretz Israel*, and I did not want to hear of America. And that was that.

I was determined. I am going to *Eretz Israel,* to build my home, my nation, and my new homeland there! I knew very well indeed that it was not so simple.

Today the British rule *Eretz Israel*, but they will leave soon, our instructors had assured us, and then we will establish our state. Of course, the Arabs did not agree, they will fight us and then—the child who only recently had hidden from the Germans in every possible place and had lived for many months in constant fear of being exposed as a Jew and destroyed. This child—who was me!—would hide no more. This child would take a rifle and fight for his people and for his homeland!

Answering one of my uncle's letters of entreaty and persuasion to come and live America, I wrote:

"No! America is the Diaspora and I am tired of living in the Diaspora! For some two thousand years we have lived among other nations in the Diaspora and look what happened recently, only a few years ago. The entire glorious Polish Jewry, millions of Jews—for all its geniuses and rabbis and for all its great professors—were destroyed with brutality and humiliation.

No! My dear Uncle, I am going to *Eretz Israel*! This same Poland, with its yeshivas and synagogues, has become one huge Jewish cemetery! I was in Warsaw and I saw the ruins of the Jewish ghetto, but what angered me most was seeing the smiling faces of the Polish Gentiles in the still devastated streets of the city. Yes, their smiling faces, their smiling eyes. They had finally ridden themselves of the Jews once and for all!"

In the Salvino camp, life went on as usual. Every week a different work schedule was announced, which kept us, the laborers, from becoming bored. A big laundry had the most modern machines in the camp, but it was unused because nobody knew how to operate it. One day a young woman arrived from *Eretz Israel*, a member of one of the *kibbutzim* there—How did she come? Why did she come? Who was she? I didn't know then and I still don't know the answers today—She saw us doing our laundry by hand and was astonished.

"What's this?," she asked. "You wash your clothes by hand when you have a modern electric laundry at your disposal here?"

Moshe Zeiri, who accompanied her on her visit, agreed with her but had to admit that nobody knew how to operate the machines. Even an Italian Gentile, who had worked in the resort village before, could only shrug his shoulders and admit that he had never used the machines and did not know how to use them.

The girl from the kibbutz in *Eretz Israel* immediately sent a special delivery letter to her home, and after some time a young man appeared and taught us how to operate the laundry. From then on we stopped washing by hand. The machines consumed much electricity, but the Joint did not restrict our budget. They were ready to approve any expense. Their only concern was that we—the holocaust survivors—should happy and that our life should be easier.

The kitchen stoves were heated with wood, which I supplied for them. Using my electrical saw, I prepared the firewood from logs that were delivered from the outside. Recently, the wood stoves were replaced with gas stoves, and

once a month a 13-foot-long gas bottle was brought to us from Bergamo. One day, while working with the electrical saw, a chip of wood pierced my hand. I removed it myself, but it turned out that part of it remained inside. At the infirmary they dressed the wound and told me not to work for awhile to prevent contamination. But I couldn't come to terms with the idea of just sitting idle. I had to work, so I ignored the doctor's orders, removed the bandage, and began to work. Three days later the wound became contaminated, and a serious infection resulted. The hand was swollen in the area of the wound, and the wound itself was full of pus. I was immediately transferred to an Italian hospital in Bergamo and operated on. I was hospitalized there for ten days. I did not speak Italian but used hand signals to explain that I was a refugee from Poland. They called me *Ebreico polacco*—a Jew from Poland—and treated me with warmth and friendliness. Most of the nurses were nuns, and they often prayed for my health and recovery. The nuns that I met there were quite young and not old women. Only the robe they wore made them look older. A dark, wide, and clumsy robe.

On the day of my discharge from the hospital, our driver from Salvino was supposed to come to take me back to the camp. I waited for a long time, and as I had brought money with me, I finally decided to take a bus and return to the camp on my own. At the time, it did not seem to be a problem. The bus service for tourists from Bergamo to Salvino ran frequently. Only later did I understand that I had made a mistake by traveling on my own without knowing the language. I saw a tram, and without knowing its destination, I boarded it believing that I would arrive at the bus station. Using hand signals, I explained to the driver that I wanted to get to the bus station for Salvino. In a similar fashion, he answered that he was going in the opposite direction, and he let me off at an intersection, pointed at a policeman standing there and said in Italian 'polizia'.

I got off the tram, approached the policeman, and explained to him—with hand signals, naturally—that I was a

Jewish refugee from Poland and wanted to go to Salvino. He understood me and asked me to wait. Soon another policeman appeared. His colleague explained to him who I was, and the second policeman took my hand like one does with an infant. He even bought me a soft drink. We took a tram, and then we finally walked a short distance to the bus station for Salvino. He also asked me if I had enough money for the bus. I showed him my money, and he bid me farewell and walked away. The bus came after about an hour and reached Salvino after a three hours journey along the breathtakingly beautiful mountain road.

Naturally the camp manager reproached me for not waiting for the car from the camp. They thought that I had lost my way in the streets and were very much concerned about me. They had even called the city police.

The Purim holiday arrived. We were preparing for the festival for a whole month. We prepared different Purim costumes from materials that we had received from the camp management. We received different colored fabrics, wood, sheets of colored paper, and thread. I was disguised as a stork, and my friend (I forgot his name) as a gypsy, and together we walked as a couple, a gypsy leading a stork by a rope, just like a person walking a dog on a leash. It took me many hours to prepare my costume because I made the head with its long bill from wood. I also got hold of some feathers, which I glued to the attire I wore.

A costume contest was held, and my friend and I won the first prize. The prize was a trip to the La Scala Opera in Milan. We went there with an Italian-speaking companion, of course. I had never been to the opera before. That night they presented Verdi's *Aida*. Our seats were far from the stage, but I could see the huge stage and the impressive settings quite clearly. Everything, the display, the music, the actors' costumes, and all the rest impressed me immensely, and for a long time I could boast about having been to an opera. I was asked lots of questions about what I had seen and heard but, to tell the truth, I did not know what to answer. I was so overwhelmed with

everything that I was unable to relate the details. In any case, I must say that I would gladly go again to see an opera at *La Scala* in Milan.

We had a synagogue in the camp and memorial ceremonies were held there from time to time. On such occasions, all the orphans—mostly camp dwellers—would recite the *Kaddish*, the mourner's prayer. (I must point out that in the Diaspora, even in Italy, we were more Jewish than we are here in Israel.) Always, on every occasion, I would recite the Kaddish in memory of all the members of my family who had perished in the holocaust. And always, after reciting the Kaddish, I would sink into a deep depression, and visions of my family members would appear in my imagination. At night I often had nightmares, seeing again the atrocities that the Germans had committed. In fact, for many years I would wake up three or four times a week, with my whole body trembling and dripping with cold sweat, as a result of nightmares. Even today, some fifty years after the holocaust, I wake up about four times a year from a horror dream. In my dreams I always wanted to shout, to cry out, but I controlled myself for fear of being heard by a Nazi soldier or by a Ukrainian policeman or even by a Jewish policemen from the Jewish Police.

I never told anyone of these dreams. For who would understand me? Only someone who had been there, only someone who had experienced the horrors of the holocaust would be able to comprehend. Once I told my family doctor about these nightmares and asked his opinion about them, but he dismissed me with pacifying words, telling me that it was not serious and that they would vanish with time. Of course it's not 'serious' Doctor. Of course it will vanish, after I reach the age of a hundred and twenty, after I pass away from this world to a world where everything is good.

I buried the horrors deep in my heart. I never told anyone that I was a holocaust survivor. I feared I would be asked why didn't we resist. Why did you go as lambs led to the slaughter? Go ask my infant sister, Zippora, why she did not resist when

the Nazis pushed her into the gas chamber! Ask my mother, such a lovely, good-natured woman who never did harm to anyone, why she did not resist that German soldier who crushed her skull with the blow of a rifle butt! Ask that baby, who had been snatched from his mother's arms by the German soldier, grasped by the legs, and had his head crushed against the wall.

Actually, neither this feeling of mine nor the nightmares have passed away until this very day. But I have not spoken about this to anyone in my family because I did not want to worry my wife and children. Anyhow they would not comprehend it. They did not experience the holocaust and, therefore, they would not be capable of understanding.

During the early years of the State of Israel, everyone was preoccupied with the pressing problems of the new state. Consequently, the holocaust and the holocaust survivors did not receive special or appropriate consideration. There wasn't enough awareness of the subject here. I do not accuse anyone. We were going through the tremendous experience of an ingathering of the exiles, and we needed great strength to overcome the cultural and language differences. To create one state and one nation, first and foremost, an understanding through communication, through a common language, must be achieved.

In addition to conducting large and small wars against the enemies surrounding us, we had to struggle hard for our very existence, to find a livelihood for all the new immigrants and even for some of the old-timers.

Those who had experienced the atrocities of the holocaust were lucky that the war had ended when it did, because each additional day, each additional hour would have increased the numbers of the dead, because the monstrous Nazi machine, the machine of extermination—to exterminate the Jews, of course—was active to the very last second.

The planned, systematic physical extermination had begun in 1942, and the war ended—at least in Poland—in the

spring of 1944, when the region was liberated by the Red Army. In other places, the war and the accompanying extermination continued until May 1945.

In 1947 we began to prepare for our journey to *Eretz Israel*. They had prepared us that it would be no picnic. The Arabs in Palestine were doing whatever they could to stop the *aliyah* (Jewish immigration), and the British were acting against ships carrying the *ma'apilim* (clandestine Jewish immigrants). The British Navy would stop the ships and transfer the *ma'apilim* to detention camps in Cyprus. We also knew that a Jewish state would be established, and rumors reached us about an anticipated war between us and the Arabs, who would certainly use force to prevent the establishment of the Jewish state.

Before sailing to Israel, those of us aged fourteen to eighteen were taken on an extensive tour of Italy. The younger children, aged four to ten, orphans and holocaust survivors, had to stay in the camp.

During the trip we toured Rome, Florence, Genoa, and Venice. We visited various beautiful museums and interesting ancient sites. Genoa became our base, and we did not return to Salvino. All our belongings were transferred from the Salvino camp to Genoa, a port city in northern Italy.

We stayed about one month in Genoa, where we were trained in hand-to-hand fighting, that is, close combat with a stick. We were also trained—secretly, in a basement—to use a Czech rifle. We went through all the rifle training stages, up to the phase of actual firing, which, we could not perform of course, because of the clandestine nature of the underground activities.

Our instructors were *Eretz-Israelis*—from the *Haganah* (the Jewish self-defense organization in Palestine), as we found out later. The training language was Yiddish. The girls were also trained to use a rifle.

In this camp we met holocaust survivors, boys from Greece who had been in the Auschwitz death camp. They were

in their twenties, charming, cheerful boys who played guitars and bazoukis. Two of them were barbers who volunteered to give all of us a free haircut. They did not speak Yiddish, and it was difficult to communicate with them without an interpreter. I don't mean a professional interpreter. There was always someone among us who knew an additional language and helped us to communicate.

Until I met these Jews, I didn't know anything about different types of Jews. Only in *Eretz Israel* did I learn about Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Yemenite Jews, as well as Jews from the Arab countries—Jews who pray from the same prayer-book, with slight changes, but with a different tune.

Some Jews couldn't carry on a conversation because they had no common language. This problem had been overcome in *Eretz Israel* because a common language was spoken—Hebrew! Those born in Israel do not distinguish between one Jew and another. For them there is no difference between a Sephardi and an Ashkenazi Jew, apart from the slight differences in the prayer-books and the style. A full unification and integration of the Jewish people in all its forms is taking place in Israel.

One day we were told to board trucks that would take us to the port, but to which port, they didn't reveal. I found out only later that the ship was waiting in the port of Genoa. After arriving at the port, we did not board the ship in daylight. The British were closely observing every port in Europe to fight the illegal Jewish immigration, so we had to observe secrecy.

We sailed for eight days on an Italian cargo ship that was carrying goods to the port of Haifa. The whole crew was Italian, and we, some three hundred young people and instructors, were the only passengers.

One night the ship cast anchor near Caesarea, and we were swiftly transferred to boats that brought us to the coast. Trucks were waiting for us there, unseen. Like sacks of potatoes, we were thrown onto the trucks, and in the twinkling of an eye we were transported to two kibbutzim, Mishmar Hasharon and

Kfar Hamaccabi near Haifa. The ship continued on to Haifa port with its cargo.

In the kibbutz we belonged to *Aliyath Hanoar*, the Youth Immigration movement. We worked on the farm for one half of the day and studied during the other half. After some time I asked to be transferred to Kfar Hamaccabi where I had friends that I wanted to join. My request was granted.

When *Zahal*, the Israel Defense Forces, was established in 1948, I joined the army and took up arms to fight for my existence as a free Jew in my homeland.

I hope that many young people will read this book of mine so that they will know what a Jewish child experienced in Galicia, Poland, during the holocaust.

The End

Shlomo Ronen at 18 years of age

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About the Author

I would first like to state that all the material that appears in my book is true and a documentary. Indeed, 50 years have already passed since then, but the events that I experienced were so severe that even after such a long time I remember them as though they had happened yesterday. In my book I concentrate on my childhood years in my native town, Trembowla, in Galicia, Poland.

I open with a brief description of my family—my mother, my father, my older brother Moshe, and my baby sister Zippora. We were a warm and friendly family, a family that supported itself with honor and with honesty regarding other Jews and regarding the gentiles, the Ukrainians and the Poles, until —

Until the day arrived that the Germans began their invasion of the Soviet Union, and, as a first step, occupied among the rest the strip of land in Poland known as Galicia, and after that the pursuit and murder of the Jews began. In the beginning, through various types of *actions,* all the Jews in another ghetto were transferred to death camps. During the ghetto period, I acted as no child, Jew or non-Jew, would have dreamed that he was capable of doing. During this short period, the Nazis brutally slaughtered my brother, my mother, and my sister. Several months later my father was sent to a death camp. And I, who was only 12 to 14 years old at the time, remained alone, pursued and threatened by the Nazi monster machine until the day arrived that they had to retreat from the advancing Red Army. I dedicate this book to the memory of the hundreds of thousands of Jewish children aged 12–14 that perished in the holocaust, and I hope that many children of the same age in Israel today will read this book and will know what happened to us during this terrible time called the Holocaust Period.

Shlomo Ronen